

## CHAPTER-I

### I. Introduction

The present dissertation aims at focusing critical attention on - Autobiographical Fiction in Indian Writing in English. Quite a number of Indian writers, both in stories and novels, have dealt with their factual experiences in a major way or casually. But here in this dissertation I will concentrate on only four writers who have written autobiographical novels with a serious concern. This work will critically examine the autobiographical fiction in Indian English literature with particular reference to Mulk Raj Anand's Seven Summers (1951), Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope (1960), Manohar Malgonkar's Distant Drum (1960), and Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1981).

Some of the novels generally considered as autobiographical are Charles Dicken's David Copperfield, D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Keller's Green Heinrich and Charlotte Bronte's Villette. In the realm of Indian literature R.K. Narayan's The English Teacher, Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope, Manohar Malgonkar's Distant Drum and Mulk Raj Anand's septet, The Seven Ages of Man are also regarded as autobiographical novels.

Now it is essential to find out what differentiates these literary works from being merely novels on the one hand or being direct autobiographies on the other, and in what condition this literary genre takes its birth.

Since our main concern is a detailed study of four Indian writers writing in English, it is necessary to get an adequate perspective for our study. There are three sections in this chapter, the first dealing with the theory of the novel, the second, with autobiography and the third, with the autobiographical novel as a literary genre.

## I

The term fiction is generally used for telling stories. Walter Allen makes a distinction between fiction and novel. Walter Allen rightly remarks that:

*The historians have been guilty of a confusion: they have assumed that the words fiction and novel are synonymous and interchangeable. They are not. At the heart of the confusion is the fact that the story is common to both. So long as men have told stories there has been fiction, whether <sup>in</sup> verse or prose, and only to this extent it is true to say that any work of fiction written before about 1670 in England is in some sense an ancestor of the novel. But the novel itself is something new.<sup>1</sup>*

Therefore, it should be noted that fiction is a general term for all forms like romance, novel, short story, drama, etc.. Fiction is certainly not a fact, but it is not exactly opposed to fact either. The task of the writer is not just to tell a story, but to give as much semblance of reality as possible. Fiction significantly differs from phantasy. In reading phantasy, we escape from life; while

in reading fiction we live a second life as it imitates life. Now to create this authenticity of life the conventional fiction writer used techniques like plot, characters and setting. It means that the fiction writer has to be a craftsman, an expert in techniques. The success of the novel relies on the way it captures the image of life. Roughly we can say that of all the aspects of the novel, telling a story is the major one. To put it in the words of E.M. Forster, "Yes - oh dear yes - the novel tells a story".<sup>2</sup> Henry James also emphasizes the fact that "the most important point of all is the story that 'the story is everything'".<sup>3</sup> and through that story the novel represents life. The novelist deftly makes use of the story, plot, characterization to create a representative aspect of life.

It is generally assumed that the novel as we know it was first written by Defoe, Richardson and Fielding in the eighteenth century. These novelists rejected the use of traditional plots and set a new tradition in fiction. In this context Ian Watt aptly says that "the literary traditionalism was first and most fully challenged by the novel, whose primary criterion was truth to individual experience ... which is always unique and therefore new".<sup>4</sup> Thus the early novelists made an extremely significant break with tradition and tried to name their characters in such a way as to suggest that they were to be regarded as individuals in the contemporary social environment. It was Richardson and Fielding who began using proper names for their characters such as Clarissa Harlowe, Pamela, Moll Flanders, Mrs Sinclair, etc.. Here the stress on realism

is obvious. The novelist explores life from all angles with his imaginative gift. He picks up events, occasions, characters from actual life and by imaginative gift he makes them finer than what they actually seem to be. Percy Lubbock says that Richardson, Tolstoy and Flaubert were the skilled masters in portraying characters. They had an excellent knowledge of human affections and manners. Lubbock comments, "To have lived with their creations is to have lived with them as well".<sup>5</sup>

Traditionally it is supposed that the novelist's main concern is reality. At this juncture, it is necessary to trace what kind of reality is dealt with in the novel. Autobiographical novel also represents the real life of the protagonist. Therefore, it is profitable to know reality in its different shades. The main purpose of this study is to know whether reality portrayed in novel and in autobiographical novel is one and the same.

The term reality has different connotations. When we say that the novel deals with reality, do we mean to say that the novelist deals with real people, their real problems and conditions? There are diverse views regarding reality. We need to make clear the sense in which literary realism is employed in critical jargon. When the author imitates the real world, in the words of Kaminsky, he has to ask himself, "What is this so-called real world? What is human existence?" The moment he asks these questions, he is dealing with what Kaminsky calls "philosophical issues - What is truth? What actually exists and what is only appearance?"<sup>6</sup> Kaminsky

proposes that the Platonic Aristotelian kind of realism remained essentially unopposed for many centuries, but by the eighteenth century philosophic speculation resulted in a new view of what is purported to be real. As a matter of fact, reality is formed and tempered by the human mind. Kaminsky says of Camus, "Albert Camus has insisted that the writer can never be realistic in the true sense of the word because he can never duplicate all that is involved in an actual occurrence".<sup>7</sup> Flaubert also showed his contempt for pure realism, despite his interest in reality itself. John Halperin rightly puts it, "Realism is the representation of mental states than the imitation of the action of the exterior world".<sup>8</sup> Henry James, speaking about realism argues:

*The measure of reality is very difficult to fix. The reality of Don Quixote or of Mr. Micawber is very delicate shade; it is a reality so coloured by the author's vision that vivid as it may be, one would hesitate to propose it as a model. ... Humanity is immense, and reality has a myriad forms.*<sup>9</sup>

Bradbury Malcolm views realism as "a severe effort of mind and comprehension, a certain sort of active and moral engagement with experience".<sup>10</sup> From this discussion we may say that realism in art is, to use Bradbury's term 'a made thing'. Therefore, realism in art varies from author to author. It is on the basis of the foregoing discussion that we can conclude that the novel's realism does not reside in the kind of life it presents, but in the way it presents it. Lubbock also emphasizes the literary reality

as he says, "A novel is a picture, a portrait, and we do not forget that there is more in a portrait than the 'likeness'. Form, design, composition, are to be sought in a novel, as in any other work of art".<sup>11</sup>

## II

### Autobiography as 'Confession'

Autobiography is supposed to be the record of personal experiences or factual experiences of the author. We don't expect much of fiction in an autobiography whereas fiction incorporates autobiographical elements. In the light of this proposition, let us study autobiography as a literary genre.

We read autobiographies with great interest because we are anxious to know the personal life of autobiographer, his emotional involvement, passions, beliefs and his prejudices. The author writes his autobiography because "it offers an ideal scope for satisfying that human urge and quest and curiosity about human nature".<sup>12</sup> It is man's natural instinct to express himself in his writing. All artists express themselves through their creations. The media for this self-expression are different. To quote D.G. Naik, "Some express the world within them through colours, some by carving on stories. And many others by words. This last is what we call literature".<sup>13</sup> Autobiography which is an offshoot of biographical writing emerged by the end of the eighteenth century

in Europe; in India it appeared with the spread of English education. It is now a recognised form of self-expression. There are many reputed writers who have written their outstanding autobiographies - Augustine, Petrarch, Montaigne, Rousseau, Stendhal, Tolstoy, Henry James and Stephen Spender to mention only a few. John Pilling is right when he says, "the most canvassed twentieth century writers - Proust, Joyce and Thomas Mann in prose, Rilke, Eliot and Valery in poetry have only contributed to the genre indirectly and have thus to some extent, ensured its neglect and partial impoverishment".<sup>14</sup>

The term 'autobiography' was used by Robert Southey in 1805. It was used for any kind of personal writing which has to do with the facts of the author's life. Oxford English Dictionary defines autobiography, 'a story of a person's life written by himself'. What the author of an autobiography does is to narrate his own history, and in doing so he reassembles the scattered elements of his life and regroups them in a comprehensive sketch. Pascal Roy defines autobiography more elaborately, "It involves the reconstruction of the movement of a life. Its centre of interest is the self, not the outside world, though necessarily the outside world must appear so that ... the personality finds its peculiar shape. But 'reconstruction of life' is an impossible task".<sup>15</sup> The fact that the autobiographer recounts past activities from his present perspectives tends to result in a reconstruction of the past in the light of the present. What it means is that total recall of the past as it once was, is just impossible to reproduce. Therefore, it is very difficult

to lay the demarcation line between fiction and fact.

When we read autobiographies, we know well that autobiography is written and read for the sake of information about the author, about his times. When we think of an autobiography, the major questions which linger in our mind are, what is the range and depth of truth in the autobiography? How is it organised to form a work of art? Here we have to take into consideration Northrop Frye's observation in connection with the truth in autobiography. He says, "Most autobiographies are inspired by a creative, and therefore fictional impulse to select only those events and experience in the writer's life that go to build up an integrated pattern".<sup>16</sup> Now it is clear that the autobiographer makes use of fictional techniques. Therefore, autobiography is an indeterminate mixture of truth and fiction about the person writing it. Sometimes the author purposely deviates from the set principles of writing the autobiography. He, while recreating the past experiences, leaves out the unimportant details of everyday life. But the thematic re-creation in the autobiography is qualified by certain principles in which the autobiographer has to function. One of the principles is that of the principle of limit. In this regard Archala Desai is perfectly right when she says that:

*The principle of limit demanded by the genre expects the autobiographer to pay homage to the spirit of truth in his recollection of the life and times that he re-creates. This means that an ideal autobiography should embody a spirit of verisimilitude*

*in which the autobiographical information provided by the author and correct biographical information should substitute for each other.*<sup>17</sup>

In other words the autobiographer has to bear in mind that he should stick to the principle of truth. This truth doesn't mean giving an exact account of events. But he has to maintain the higher and lower plane of verisimilitude. Both, the novel and autobiography deal with a single truth - that of artistic creation. To explain it in the words of Carole Durix, we may say that, "neither the novels nor the autobiography can be considered to portray an absolutely truthful picture of events for both contribute to the creation of a personal myth created by the author".<sup>18</sup> In the process of recreation, the author discards the events, incidents that he considers irrelevant and "long periods of time have to be condensed into the space of the reading of the book - writing cannot produce faithfully the events as they were".<sup>19</sup>

The moment the author declares that a particular book is his autobiography, we try to compare the book with what we know about the author's life, as we believe in the fact that "it postulates a pre-occupation with the self that may, often does, deteriorate into vanity, complacency, self-indulgence. But in its best examples ... it holds the balance between the self and the world, the subjective and the objective".<sup>20</sup> But sometimes what happens is that an author feels an outcast, so that he pleads to be forgiven, condoned and even condemned. According to Stephen Spender, Rousseau's Confessions is the best example which reveals

this secret motive of the human heart. Rousseau begins his writing by saying that he has undertaken the task of telling the whole truth about himself which has not been undertaken so far. The secret motive of Rousseau was not to prove that he was different from other men but to prove that they are like himself. His Confessions reveals the fact that all are equally bad. Therefore, the author has to be careful in creating his protagonist and should resist the temptations to what Avrom Fleishman calls 'self-magnification' and 'extravagant self-denigration'.<sup>21</sup> That is why Stephen Spender vehemently criticizes the autobiographers who are much interested in themselves and write about things that are quite insignificant. "The inner voice of self-awareness", says Spender, "is not respectful of human institutions, betrays other people, and reveals oneself as base ... Self-revelation of the inner life is perhaps dirty business".<sup>22</sup>

Autobiography is then, "an interplay, a collusion, between past and present, its significance is indeed more the revelation of the present situation than the uncovering of the past".<sup>23</sup> Thus, fiction and facts merge with each other. But the only thing the autobiography has to do is to maintain the higher level of verisimilitude.

### III

As mentioned earlier, the question is what differentiates autobiographical novel from being merely novel on the one hand or being direct autobiography on the other and in what way this literary genre takes its birth. Our main concern is to examine

critically whether the autobiographical novelists by using factual experiences in their novels either enrich or impoverish their literary creations as the writer is obviously free to make the most of both words - autobiography and novel, fact and fiction. In this context Pascal Roy comments, "If one starts with the idea that the terms 'fictional' and 'true' will serve to distinguish these two forms (the novel and autobiography) of writing, one is doomed to disappointment".<sup>24</sup> It means that we can't just say that these are the facts and these are the fictional materials used by the author, as it is impossible to draw a demarcation line between the two. If the author violates the principle of limit imposed on him, we can say that by this violation he is either glorifying or demeaning himself. Pascal Roy says that, "True autobiographies are those whose chief concern is to illuminate a personality. ... In every case, however, the autobiographer is a bit of novelist".<sup>25</sup> It means that the autobiographer, like fiction-writer, constructs a coherent story and characters.

Instead of writing a straightforward autobiography, the author adopts the form of the novel to conceal some of the facts of his life or as means of wish fulfilment. "A novelistic disguise", says Roy, "was necessary, no doubt, in times when writers were more reluctant to be candid about themselves and their acquaintance."<sup>26</sup> The attempt to sift the factual from the fictional in an autobiography on the one hand, or to sift the fictional from the factual in a novel is the problematics of autobiography - novel nexus. As Archala Desai has pointed out that the "available biographical

and autobiographical information helps criticism to establish an objective correlation between the fictional work and the real life of the author".<sup>27</sup> In the light of this argument let us focus our attention on autobiographical novels. In her perceptive analysis of how autobiographical novel takes its birth, Archala Desai rightly comments:

*The autobiographical novelist, like the autobiographer, also draws material from the events and experiences of his own life. He tries to recollect and recreate the experiences of his life and thereby depict a meaning of that life. However, this literary exercise does not lead to the writing of an autobiography, because, the autobiographical novelist makes use of autobiographical material and subjects it to the fictional impulse of his imagination. It is this process of combining the world of reality with the world of fiction that gives birth to the autobiographical novel. Therefore, the autobiographical novel is bracketed between the genre of the novel on the one hand, and that of the autobiography on the other.*<sup>28</sup>

To sum up, the autobiographical novel is a fusion of autobiography and the novel. The author exercises the novel form for various advantages. One of them is to maintain the unity of literary presentation for aesthetic needs which is not so easy to achieve in the straightforward autobiography. At this juncture, Pascal Roy aptly remarks that:

*It is an advantage to be able to tell of circumstances that occur outside the range of the author's direct experience, some autobiographies do this, especially when telling us of the author's parentage, but most must necessarily narrow their scope to that of the author-hero's direct experience. The novelist, on the other hand, can evoke events out of his personal range, the unexpressed thoughts of others, he can reconstruct conversations which memory could not possibly retain. These advantages are of course pitfalls too, for the imagination can lead to the writer away from the actual truth.*<sup>29</sup>

Roy emphasizes the fact that authors prefer novel form to autobiography because autobiography has certain limitations. The author knows well "that memory is faulty, and that it inevitably charges past experiences with a meaning they acquire only in retrospect, and he several times discusses the danger of deluding oneself about oneself and of substituting an ideal self for the unreal".<sup>30</sup> The novel is complete in itself whereas autobiography always reaches forward to the man writing. In his book Design and Truth in Autobiography, Pascal Roy has critically examined three autobiographical novels: Keller's Green Heinrich, D.H. Lawrence's Sons and Lovers, and James Joyce's A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

D.H. Lawrence, for example, in his novel Sons and Lovers makes necessary changes to achieve an artistic effect. The hero Paul Morel represents the author. He also embodies the struggle that Lawrence embodied in later life and justifies its

autobiographical status. As Roy rightly observes:

*He invents situation and adds data which could never actually have been available to him, such as, for instance, the thoughts of his mother as Paul Morel lies in his cradle. He writes about himself in the third person. He simplifies the family, omitting his elder brother and younger sister, adding a younger brother.*<sup>31</sup>

As poets sometimes indulge in poetic license, autobiographical novelists also seem to be tempted to make use of what Archala Desai calls in her thesis, 'fictional license'. And in doing so he derives the name of his protagonist from old myths and stories to emphasize his role by the symbolism. The best example of this is Mulk Raj Anand's The Seven Ages of Man.

In this respect Archala Desai says of Anand:

*Mulk Raj Anand alludes to the Krishna myth in his autobiographical novels by creating Krishna the protagonist, in the mould of Lord Krishna. Therefore, an autobiographical novelist may use such symbolism from the imaginary world of fiction to intensify the effect of his work, and convey a meaning of his life that is not possible in a straightforward autobiography.*<sup>32</sup>

At times, the author alters some of the traits of the personality of the protagonist to convey his message effectively. Pascal Roy cites the example of James Joyce's A Portrait of the

Artist as a Young Man in which the protagonist Stephen Dedalus is shown far more serious and humourless character than Joyce himself. Thus the author makes use of fictional impulses and presents the reality of his case.

In order to achieve an artistic unity and compactness of the structure the author uses imaginary characters and the characters who are no more and the incidents which have never taken place in his life. To sum up, we can conclude that "the autobiographical novel differs from the autobiography by its capacity to seek answers to the problem of real life in the imaginary world of fiction".<sup>33</sup> In her thesis, Archala Desai successfully elucidates the fact that some secret motives compel the author to take the shelter of the novel form. To quote her at length:

*One of the most important motivations in writing an autobiographical novel could be the realization of such a satisfaction through the life of the protagonist in the fictional treatment. ... But the motivation may also be a complex mixture of various other conditions. The incapacity to look at start reality in its bareness, the impossibility of seeing home truths face to face, the desire to gloss over minor personal weaknesses, the need to hide behind a protective proxy, the desire to tell the story of one's life and yet appear to be telling a fictional story so that the reader does not openly see the author's personal records, the desire to reach a wider audience, may contribute to the author's choosing the autobiographical*

*novel, as a literary form which by its open structure allows the documentation of fact in fiction.*<sup>34</sup>

To speak of the style of narration, generally the author uses first person narrative technique to convey his point of view. In both, the autobiography and the novel, the reader-writer distances are well adjusted. In the novel the reader identifies himself either with the protagonist or he and the author stand apart to watch the life of the protagonist whereas in the autobiography, the reader identifies with the narrator-author. But in the autobiographical novel, however, the voice of the narrator, and the voice of the author either merge or sometimes appear to be distinct.

To sum up, in the light of the foregoing considerations, I intend to analyse the genre of autobiographical novel in the context of Indian English novel with a view to defining whether the autobiographical element enriches or impoverishes the novel. In other words I intend to analyse the four novels - Seven Summers, The Serpent and the Rope, Distant Drum and Midnight's Children, in order to arrive at the aesthetic synthesis and its quality brought about by the individual writer between his autobiography and his creative impulses. For instance, in Chapter II I have discussed Mulk Raj Anand's Seven Summers. What Anand has done in Seven Summers is to propose 'the contemporary myth of man'. I have tried to find out how, by using fictional faculty Anand tries to transform some of the facts of his life into fiction and in doing so how he makes an attempt to universalize the facts of his life. In other

words, Anand tries to universalize the life of the protagonist, Krishna Chander by exploiting myths, legends and fictional impulses. In Chapter III, I have discussed Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope, which deals with Ramaswamy's quest for Absolute Truth. This novel has been analysed as an autobiographical novel. The protagonist Ramaswamy is created in the image of the author. Non-dualistic philosophy is central to his consciousness and his identity. And that is why the hero of the novel and the author become indistinguishable. In Chapter IV, I have attempted to examine Manohar Malgonkar's Distant Drum as an autobiographical novel. It is an autobiographical novel in the sense that, the story this novel deals with is based on Malgonkar's own experiences as an army officer in the Indian Army. It means that Distant Drum is a fictional documentation of the military code which Malgonkar holds most important in real life as well. And finally, in Chapter V, I have discussed Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children, which is treated as a new genre in the form of the autobiographical novel. Rushdie connects the personal life of Saleem Sinai with the historical life of India. It means that, the personal and historical stories are intermixed in such a manner that they seem to be inseparable.

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