

Chapter - I

@@@@@@@@@@@
@@@@@@@@@

*
*
*
*
*
*

@@@@@@@@@
@@@@@@@@@@@

Prespectives

I — Perspectives

Indian Writing in English is, by its very nature, a product of two traditions — one, the tradition of British literature and, two, that of Indian literature. Any critical study of any aspect of Indian Writing in English, therefore, has to be done in respect of its relations to the two traditions. In this chapter I shall try to take a quick and, rather sweeping, overview of the theme of childhood as dealt with in these two traditions. It is needless to say that it is easier to take a review of the theme of childhood in the context of British literature than in the context of Indian literature, because British literature is one monolithic entity, whereas Indian literature is characterised by multiplicity : it consists of ancient Sanskrit and Prakrit literatures and literatures in major Indian languages. Therefore,

an overview of the theme of childhood in Indian literature is bound to be highly sketchy and tentative compared to that in British literature. Since our main concern is a detailed study of two Indian writers in English, it is enough, I think, if we manage to get an adequate perspective for our study. There are three sections in this chapter, the first dealing with the theme of childhood in English literature (fiction), the second with the theme of childhood in Indian literature, and the third with the same theme as dealt with in Indian fiction in English.

I

It is with Dickens that childhood was established as an important theme in English fiction. Oliver Twist (1838) was the first novel in English with an exclusive focus on childhood. Dickens' concern with childhood is seen in half a dozen more novels : Nicholas Nickleby (1839), The Old Curiosity Shop (1841), Dombey and Son (1848), David Copperfield (1850), Hard Times (1854), Great Expectations (1861). We also

find childhood treated with particular interest by novelists like Trollope, Charollette Bronte, Mrs. Gaskell, Charles Kingsley, George Eliot, Mrs. Henry Wood, Richard Jefferies, Stevenson and Marie Corelli. We might also mention writers like Kipling, Walter Pater and Barrie as writers who contributed to childhood fiction in Victorian literature.

The concept of the child on which the Victorian fiction of childhood ~~was~~ generally based was essentially derived from Rousseau on the one hand and the Romantic poets on the other. It would be profitable to examine the nature of this concept a little in detail, since the Indian writers in English inherited it.

Rousseau was the first serious thinker to give considerable thought to the study of childhood and education. His concern with childhood was a direct outcome of his belief in the natural goodness of man and the social origin of evil. He emphasised that the original nature of child was innocence, that "childhood has its own ways of seeing, thinking and feeling".¹ He considered childhood as the period of life where man is most noble, natural, virtuous and nearest to

the state of Nature. Along with Rousseau, the Romantic poets, particularly Blake and Wordsworth, shaped the nineteenth century sensibility towards childhood. The Romantic poets reaffirmed Rousseau's belief in the child's essential innocence and his capacity for joy. Blake's Songs of Innocence and Wordsworth's poems, like 'Ode on the Intimations of Immortality' clearly present the image of the Romantic child. Wordsworth, for example, speaks of the child as coming fresh from heaven. He says, "Heaven lies about us in our infancy", and during childhood things seem "Apparelled in celestial light".²

The main characteristics of the Romantic child as he emerged from the works of Rousseau and the Romantic poets are as follows : The child is conceived as essentially innocent, good, sensitive and imaginative. Growth from childhood to maturity is associated with the sense of regrettable loss of the child's extraordinary qualities. Often it is society that kills the child's innocence and joy and puts 'the bird that is born for joy' into a hateful 'cage'. With regard to the emergence of childhood as an important

literary theme during the period of the Romantic Revival, Peter Coveney says in his Poor Monkey :

"The appearance of the child was indeed simultaneous with the changes in sensibility and thought which came with the end of 18th century... It was closely related with the revolution in sensibility which we call the 'Romantic Revival'."3

Mr. Coveney defines this revolution as the movement from Reason to Feeling in opposition to the materialist, rationalist intellectualism of the eighteenth century.

The Victorian treatment of childhood in fiction is broadly characterised by (1) the Romantic concept of the child; (2) the child as a victim of various social evils; (3) the child as an object of pity, sympathy and affection; (4) the treatment of childhood from a nostalgic and sentimental point of view.

It is with the twentieth century that we find a marked change in the literary attitude to childhood. Samuel Butler's The Way of All Flesh, published in 1903, reveals a definite reaction to the

concept of the Romantic Child. Butler's attitude to childhood is remarkably free from sentimentality and idealisation. The result is, we get a realistic picture of the childhood of Theobald Pontifex and Earnest Pontifex. The next significant writer who treated childhood in a new way was Henry James in his novels like What Maisie Knew and The Turn of the Screw. What Maisie Knew is decidedly the first novel with a complete psychological focus on the child's consciousness. The child in Henry James is a complex being growing according to its own inner laws and according to its own spontaneous reactions and responses to the outside world.

In the early decades of the twentieth century we find a number of writers treating childhood with conspicuous interest. The most outstanding of them are Katherine Mansfield, James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, Compton Mackenzie, Hugh Walpole and Forrest Reid. In the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century we have some more important writers like Richard Hughes, Graham Greene, Eiluned Lewis and Virginia Woolf. From 1940 onwards we have a number of noteworthy writers of childhood fiction like

Joyce Cary, L. P. Hartley, Denton Welch, A. L. Barker, Rosamond Lehmann, William Golding and Rumer Godden.

This great interest in the theme of childhood in this century could be attributed, primarily, to the remarkable development of psychology and psychoanalysis in this century. It was particularly Freud, who presented the most sensational theory of infantile sexuality, who pointed out that the child is father to the Man in a far more important sense than Wordsworth ever dreamt of. He directed our attention to the supreme importance of childhood experiences in influencing, consciously and unconsciously, our adult behaviour and attitudes. Along with Freud mention must be made of Alfred Adler whose contribution to the study of childhood is equally significant. He rejected Freud's theory of infantile sexuality and emphasised the factors of heredity, environment and the individual psyche in the formation of man's life-style. The child has been studied in this century so comprehensively and in such detail, and so much of intelligent care has been devoted to the development of the child and his problems that the twentieth century has been rightly called 'The Century of the Child'.

As against the image of the Romantic child that dominated the nineteenth century fiction, we have now the modern image of the child as a complex being, born with libidinous impulses, living in his own world of sensations, feelings, play and fantasy (this world is not always one of innocence, sweetness and joy), subject to a complex process of psycho-sexual development. The modern concept of the child has, naturally, notable effects on the childhood fiction of the twentieth century : (a) Since childhood is now considered autonomous, it has become a theme demanding an exclusive focus. Hence, we have many novels in the twentieth century with children as central characters. (b) Because of the new importance of childhood in relation to man's later development, depiction of childhood has become almost a necessary part of the comprehensive presentation of a man's life. (c) Because of the new awareness of the child's consciousness, the child is normally depicted from the inside, that is, on the level of his own consciousness.

II

Without going into details one may merely hint at the long tradition of the childhood theme in Sanskrit and, later, in Indian literature in native languages. The child in the Hindu family, particularly the son, has an extremely significant place. According to Manu,⁴ it is the putra who saves the father from falling into a hell called put. Brihaspati also says that the son is necessary for performing the sacrifices and shrādhās, in addition to taking care of parents in their old age.⁵ The male child, therefore, was looked after very well and at the age of seven or eight the child from the three Varnas-Brahmana, Kshatriya and Vaishya — was sent to a guru for education. The performance of the Upanayana ceremony was of great significance because it initiated the child into the first stage of life, the Brahmacharyāshram. The Guru-Shishya relationship played an important role in the development of the child. Many stories in the Upanishads and the Purānās are the outcome of the teacher telling the stories to the young students. In the Upanishads we have many tales of pupils who take every pain to

serve their gurus. Uddalaka Aruni, for example, is one of the great examples of total obedience to the guru: he blocks a breach in the dam with his own body to save the land from being flooded with water. There is also a story of the young Nachiket, who questions his father about the poor quality of the cow that he was giving away as dāna, and he has to go to Yama, who, however, blesses him with knowledge. Nachiketa's quest for knowledge and Uddalaka's total devotion to the guru are echoed in a later story of Ekalavya included in the Mahābhārata: Ekalavya offers his very thumb to his guru Dronāchārya at the latter's request. There are similar stories of obedience to parents; for instance, we have the story of Shravana, who carried his blind parents on his shoulders and took them on a pilgrimage. Dasharatha kills Shravana by mistake and is cursed by the latter's parents to undergo a similar kind of suffering through separation from the son. In the story of Bhakta Prahlād, however, we have a son rebelling against his father and asserting his devotion to God Hari. In the great Rāmāyana we have the description of

the childhood of Rāma and his brother in Bālakānd, which is paralleled, later, with the description of the childhood of Rama's sons, Lava and Kusha, at the sage Valmiki's āshram. In the Mahābhārata, too, there is a detailed description of the childhood of the Pāndavās and the Kauravās, and the Kauravas' jealousy and hatred towards Pandavas has been shown as having their origin right from the childhood days. The most striking child-character in the Mahābhārata is, of course, Abhimanyu, Arjuna's son, who takes up the challenge of entering the chakravyuha. The greatest Purānic child is, of course, Krishna. The stories of his Bālalīla--of his playfulness and naughtiness, of his divine charm and strength--are well known. In his play, Shākuntala, Kālidāsa created in the last act a fascinating picture of a child, Bharata, playing with a lion's cub. Bānabhatta's Kādambari also contains a detailed account of the child-life of the Chandrapīda, the prince of Ujjain and the lover of Kadambari. Dandin's Dashakumarcharita is, as the very title suggests, a prose romance about

ten children who are separated from their parents and meet with a number of interesting adventures in their forlorn condition. One of the latest Sanskrit works, Paramānanda's Shivbhārata written in early seventeenth century, describes the childhood of Chhatrapati Shivaji. This sketchy account of the theme of childhood in Sanskrit literature is enough to indicate the possibility of doing significant research in the area.

In modern Marathi literature though the child appears tangentially in the novels of Hari Narayan Apte and others, it is only in the early forties that he begins to take the centre of the stage in some novels like N.D.Tamhankar's Gotya, Khanvilkar's Chandu and Sane Guruji's Shyamchi Aai. The child in all these novels is essentially the Romantic child, innocent, good, obedient and playful. The child figure in Marathi literature could be easily traced to the images enshrined in ancient Sanskrit literature. It is only with the modernist writers like Gangadhar Gadgil and Arvind

Gokhale that the child gets transformed in terms of modern consciousness--curious, questioning and morally perplexed. A research study of the theme of childhood in modern Marathi literature is also called for.

III

Childhood finds an early entrance into Indian fiction in English right from the days of Rabindranath Tagore. Tagore, who made the child a central figure in the collection of his poems Shishu (1903) wrote a number of significant stories with children as protagonists: 'Kabuliwallah', 'The Home Coming', 'The Child's Return' are probably some of the best childhood stories to be found in Indian fiction. 'Kabuliwallah' tells a tender story of affection between the five-year old Mini and the Kabuliwallah, the seller of dry fruits from Afghanistan, the latter juxtaposing his affection

for Mini with the memories of his own daughter. 'The Home Coming' is a tragic story of a fourteen year old boy Phatik, who is alienated from his mother and suffers humiliation in alien city surroundings and dies, with an unfulfilled longing to go home. 'The Child's Return' is a remarkable story about the child-servant relationship, the kind of relationship that Tagore was acquainted with in his aristocratic home. The finest child figure that Tagore created is, of course, Amal, the protagonist of the play The Post Office (1911) in which he presents an invalid child, almost on the brink of death, facing the external reality and the inward fantasy world simultaneously.

Mulk Raj Anand and R. K. Narayan are the greatest Indian writers in English to focus their attention on childhood. Since I am going to deal with them in detail in this dissertation, I think it is good to drop them from this overview. The other novelists who have dealt with childhood are Sudhin N. Ghosh, Bhabani Bhattacharya, Raja Rao, Manohar Malg^oonkar, and Kamala Markandaya. Even a casual reading of the stories and novels of

childhood of Indian Writing in English shows that the concept of the child that governs Indian Writing is generally that of the Romantic child. And the Romantic child is an ideal instrument for exposing the social evils by showing the child as a victim of these evils. Sudhin Ghosh (1899-1965) who published four novels in quick succession — And Gazelles Leaping (1949), Cradle of the Clouds (1951), The Vermilion Boat (1953) and The Flame of the Forest (1955) — uses the childhood and boyhood of his protagonist to expose the corrupt forces of society. The use of the child-as-victim, a favourite technique of the Victorian novelist like Dickens, is ideally suited to the Indian novel which is primarily concerned with social reform and social transformation. Since Mulk Raj Anand is a great representative of this attitude to the child — the child as victim — I have taken him as one of the writers for a detailed study in this dissertation. The classical attitude inherited from Sanskrit and regional literatures conceives of a child as an organic part of society. And this attitude gets reflected in Manohar Malgaonkar's portrait of the childhood of Abhayraj in 'The Princes and Kamala Markandayá's

portrait of the tragic life of poor Indian children in her novels Nectar in a Sieve (1954) and A Handful of Rice (1966), Bhabani Bhattacharya's So Many Hungers (1947) is one of the finest novels using the technique of child-as-victim to a great advantage for the purpose of exposing the inhumanity generated by famine and hunger in preindependence India. Indian writers are exploring in their own ways various attitudes to the theme of childhood — from the Romantic to the modernist, from the classical to the realistic, from the conception of the child as a part of family structure to that of the child as an autonomous entity. The theme of childhood in Indian fiction in English is certainly a viable area of doctoral research. In this dissertation I am confining my study only to two of the major writers with a view to exploring the nature of their treatment of childhood.

NOTES AND REFERENCESCHAPTER - I

1. J. J. Rousseau, Emile 1762 tr - by Barbara Foxley (London : Everyman's library, 1911) reprinted, 1955, p. 54.
2. Matthew Arnold (ed.), Poems of Wordsworth 'Ode on ^{the} ~~the~~ Eliminations of Immortality' (Macmillan and Co., 1929) pp. 201-208. nt/m
3. Peter Coveney, Poor Monkey (London : Rockliff, 1957) pp. ix.
4. Mahamahopadhyaya Panduranga Vaman Kane, History of Dharmasastra, Vol.III (Poona : Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, 1946) p. 642. a/
5. Ibid.