

CHAPTER - IANGLO-INDIAN FICTION AND EDWARD THOMPSON

## I

**Historical Background of Anglo-Indian Literature**

Anglo-Indian literature was the product of the British involvement in India and therefore to understand it properly one must have an adequate knowledge of certain historical, political and sociological facts regarding the British involvement in India. It was during the Mogul Rule that the riches of India attracted the foreigners to the glorious land which was full of 'milk and honey'. The British East India Company received from Queen Elizabeth I a charter to do business in India in 1600. By the 17th century the British acquired complete control over India and defeated both the Portuguese and the French. In the latter half of the 18th century the British became absolute political power in India. It was during this period that they acquired confidence of an imperialistic power, They looted India wholesale. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar puts it appropriately -

"It was a triple invasion . . . the merchants came to <sup>make</sup> quick money, the missionaries came to save pagan souls, and the soldier-politician came for achieving the conquest of the country".<sup>1</sup>

The misgovernment in many fields by Englishmen culminated in the military explosion of the 1857 Mutiny. The effect of it was that English East India Company ended and the Government of India was taken over by the crown. Queen Victoria

issued her proclamation in 1858 and instead of Governor-General Viceroy started to handle its administration through the I.C.S. officers, English and Indian.

Curzon was responsible for the policy of decentralization and he divided Bengal into two parts antagonising the Indians against the English. Although much of the unrest in India was due to the restlessness of Lord Curzon -

"Curzon loved India as one loved his dog, a useful and obedient slave".<sup>2</sup>

Different Viceroys and Governor-Generals carried out many reforms but the declaration of the Dominion Status in 1929 could not satisfy the Indian Moderates and Extremists. The Congress declared 26th January 1930 - the Day of Independence. The civil disobedience, non-co-operation movements were started in India under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. Then came in 1930 the Round Table Conference and Gandhi-Irwin pact in 1931.

The British attitude towards India underwent significant changes along the passing years. In pre-mutiny times the Englishmen were romantically motivated towards India. But later they felt that they were the only dominant rulers in India. So the tension between the two races increased. But after the first World War their illusion of permanence in India was shattered. India's freedom-movement flourished under Mahatma Gandhi's leadership and led to Independence. What started as an interesting meeting, resulted into an imperialistic domination which

later on collapsed into a doubtful introspection. In the final years of the Raj, the British were full of melancholy for the loosening grip over India after realizing the writing on the wall.

These historical changes were systematically and sensitively recorded in British diaries, journals and of course, the Anglo-Indian novels. Greenberger's categorisation of the changing attitudes under labels such as 'Confidence', 'Doubt' and 'Melancholy' offer a useful and neat instrument for measuring the impact of history on the Britisher's imaginative life.<sup>3</sup>

## II

### The Term Anglo-Indian Literature

There are at least three meanings of the <sup>term</sup> Anglo-Indian literature -

- 1) Literature produced by Englishmen who lived in India for a short period or permanently.<sup>4</sup>
- 2) Literature produced by Eurasians or the Englishmen of mixed origins (father English and mother Asian).<sup>5</sup>
- 3) Literature written in English by Indian writers.<sup>6</sup>

I use the term Anglo-Indian in the first sense, referred above, meaning books written by any British author who temporarily or permanently found himself in India and wrote about the encounter with Indians through meaningful fiction.

Anglo-Indian fiction is an important branch of Anglo-Indian literature. Many critics have contributed to this branch in recent times. Apart from the standard books by Oaten, Bhupal Singh, Susanne Howe<sup>7</sup>, Jefferey Myeres<sup>8</sup>, Allen J. Greenberger, Benita Parry, Stephen Hemenway, there are also a few recent studies by M.K. Naik and Sujit Mukherjee, which help us to put the Anglo-Indian novels into a proper focus and tradition.

### III

#### British Encounter With India in Anglo-Indian Fiction

Every Anglo-Indian novel is necessarily the story of the imaginative passage to India, successful or unsuccessful, undertaken by the hero or the heroine. The images of India reflected in these novels offer a spectrum of changing colours which are touched by fascination as well as repulsion. Ruth P. Jhabvala, a Polish novelist, who wrote <sup>about</sup> India quite a good number of novels and stories has the following confession to make -

"There is a cycle that Europeans (coming to India) . . . tend to pass through. It goes like this: first stage, everything Indian is marvellous: second stage, everything Indian not so marvellous: third stage, everything Indian abominable".<sup>9</sup>

Hence it is an interesting enquiry to try to understand how India appealed to the major Anglo-Indian novelists, so that

we shall be in position to define Edward Thompson's attitude with greater clarity.

Meadows Taylor and Rudyard Kipling are early examples of the imaginative expressions of the British attitude to India. Taylor's Confessions of A Thug (1839), Tara (1863), Ralph Darnell (1865) and Seeta (1872), handled the theme of India with great sensibility but with an aura of romanticism. It was well for Taylor to cultivate a rosy view about the relations between the English and Indians in the early period of the honey-moon between the two races.

Kipling's is a different case because of his openly imperialistic stand. Plain Tales from the Hills (1868) and Kim (1901) are the proof of his profound understanding and sympathy for India but his is an essentially colonial encounter with India.

Edward Thompson belongs to that phase of British colonialism which saw the gradual loss of British confidence in the Indian affairs. He wrote about the twenties of this century when there was the rise of liberal thinking among the Englishmen and the British started doubting the permanence of their rule over India. E.M. Forster and Edward Thompson offer a case of curious comparison because of the many commonly shared assumptions regarding the Indo-British relations. In many respects they are like each other but their differences are well-marked. The second phase of decolonization during the Post World-War period when India's freedom movement reached its climax, received imaginative expression in the novels written by

Forster and Thompson. Thus both these writers belonged to the realistic encounter with India in the final days of the British Raj when imperialism dissolved into thin air.

#### IV - A

#### Edward Thompson (1886-1946) : Biographical Details

Edward J. Thompson was born in the family of a missionary on 8th April 1886 in England. His father Rev. John Moses Thompson lived at Trichnopoly in India and probably this childhood experience of Indian life attracted him to the profession of a teacher in India.

He <sup>had</sup> His early education × × × × in England and he graduated from London University in 1909. After working in a bank for some time he was ordained and sent to the Wesleyan college at Bankura, West Bengal in 1910. He served there as an educational missionary from 1910 to 1923. In 1923 he returned to England and worked for his Master's degree in Oxford University and the Doctorate of London University. He also taught Bengali to the I.C.S. probationers in London University. He ~~was~~ visited Mesopotamia with the army at the time of the First World War. He was married in 1919 and returned to Bankura as an acting principal. Many of these biographical details are found reflected in the characters of two of his heroes - Vincent Hamar from An Indian Day and Robert Alden from A Farewell to India.<sup>10</sup> Thompson worked as a research fellow in Indian History at the Oriel College from 1936 to 1946 and in 1934 to 1936 he registered as a Leverhulme Research fellow in Indian History at Oxford.

Even after returning to England Thompson visited India four times in 1932, 1936, 1939, 1943. His first visit to India was longer because he lived in West Bengal from 1910 to 1923 except the war-period. During this period he worked as an educational missionary and taught English to the Indians. In one of these visits he had the occasion to meet Gandhi and Nehru but his 1936 visit was full of disillusionment and weariness. In a letter written to Nehru <sup>on</sup> 24 November 1936 he says -

"Being now old and profoundly disillusioned and depressed by everything in India as well as the west, I am going to concentrate, for the little time left to me, on my own country's affairs. I now know, . . . that any Englishman who troubles himself about India is a fool".<sup>11</sup>

But this tiredness was not permanent because Thompson could never keep himself away from Indian affairs. Instead of breaking all contacts with India he found himself working as a research fellow in Indian history at Oriel College. It was not for nothing that Mahatma Gandhi called him 'a Prisoner of India'.<sup>12</sup> On that eventful day in 1913 Thompson visited Tagore at Shantiniketan which was very near from Bankura. It was a Red-Letter day because <sup>there was</sup> the news that Tagore had been awarded the Nobel Prize for literature. It shook not only India but the whole world. Thompson saw with his own eyes the great love and respect Tagore was held in by his people.

Thus Thompson had a very long and memorable contact with India. It must be noted here that all of the Anglo-Indian novelists, including E.M. Forster, Thompson's encounter with India and Indians was more significant. He loved the land and its people and tried to bridge the gap between his own people and Indians. His attitude was refreshingly free from the typical British/<sup>pride</sup> and prejudice. It was his relation/<sup>with India</sup> that made him think about the Indian stalwarts like Nehru, Sapru, Srinivas Shastri, Jayakar, Gandhi and Tagore. On the one hand, he was in close acquaintance with the important political personalities who had lion's share in shaping the destiny of India at this crucial juncture in Indian history. On the other hand he was familiar with one great Indian literature, that of Bengal. He not only learnt the language but acquired considerable command over it, so that he could produce English translations of Bengali works. Thus the cultural inwardness and a genuine desire to transcend the limits imposed by his foreign<sup>n</sup>ness made him a true friend of India. No wonder Thompson wrote profusely about India and Indians. Before his death in 1946 Thompson had produced a large body of books on India which are of expository kind as well as the works of fiction.

#### IV-B

##### His Work

Thompson's authentic contact with India made him 'an expert on Indian affairs', a friend of India', 'a prisoner of India', his position is so complex that we are unable to put him in any neat category and label him as an imperialist or anti-



imperialist, a pro-Raj or anti-Raj writer. After studying his expository writings one feels that he was a pendulum hanging downward, free to swing to and fro between the two extremes of India and England. Benita parry's observation on this point is very relevant.

"The will to effect a Christian reconciliation inspired the message on India which Edward Thompson addressed to the two nations. Thompson was dedicated to humanizing an inhuman situation, putting forward and working to implement a multitude of suggestions and schemes at making the British Empire a more generous and moral institution and the British - Indian relationship a more compassionate one".<sup>13</sup>

Thompson wrote all sorts of books - poems, novels, plays, essays, prose-works, thoughtful books on Indian politics. All these show us his intimacy with India and grasp of Indian reality which was so complex during the twenties.

#### IV-C His Novels

After returning to England his career as an Anglo-Indian novelist began in 1924. At first he wrote Cithaeron Dialogues (1924). In 1927, he published These Men Thy friends, a rather journalistic account of the Mesopotamian Campaign than a novel. In the same year was published his first novel from his famous

Indian trilogy, An Indian Day, which was set in Bengal during the disturbed period of 1925. According to Benita Parry it is a 'Counterblast' to A Passage to India.<sup>14</sup> Mulk Raj Anand ~~also~~ thinks that :

"A passage to India and An Indian Day are complimentary with only minor differences in emphasis".<sup>15</sup>

Thompson pays attention to the political aspects of the Indian problem and puts in a vigorous case for India's freedom. According to him lack of mutual understanding between the two races is the root cause of the problem.

In 1929, another book came out -Night Falls on Siva's Hill, also an Indian novel. Dealing with the period of 1900, it is a portrait of the British India, and the Anglo-Indian failure. Sujit Mukherjee examines it and says that :

"The novelist is unable to project any persistent image of India of 1900 where he has chosen to set his story".<sup>16</sup>

In the next year, another novel, In Araby Orient (1930) was published. In 1931 his second novel from Indian trilogy, A Farewell to India, came out. It is a political dissertation and a picture of Indian nationalism. It is his political inspection of India during the twenties, a sequel to the earlier novel An Indian Day. Some characters are continued from the earlier Indian

novel. The failure of an Englishman, Alden, in solving the racial and colonial problem of reconciliation between India and England is projected here.

In 1932, he visited India to work as a special correspondent for the Manchester Guardian. The reflection of the visit made him write A Letter from India (1932). In the same year his next novel Lament for Adonis (1932) was published. In 1933 appeared another of the Indian novel So A Poor Ghost which aroused severe reaction in England. Thompson himself in a letter to Tagore says "(The book) Caused intense resentment to Anglo-Indians more than anything I have done since The Other Side of the Medal".<sup>17</sup>

The hero of this book is a critic of the English Government and wants to be a connector between East and West and hopes for the reconciliation of the two races.

Introducing Arnison appeared in 1935, which is a semi - autobiographical novel where he writes about his early childhood and school-days and poverty after his father's death. In 1937 another novel Burmese Silver was published. It takes us away from India into the heart of Burma. His last Indian novel from trilogy An End of the Hours came out in 1938. It is a serious novel. He wrote touchingly to Nehru about it -

"It hardly pretends to be a story, and can please no one, from our own diehards who will want to flay me alive for

the opening pages, to the Indian nationalist who will want to stone me for others. . . . , but then I am nearly finished".<sup>18</sup>

Alden, the mouthpiece of Thompson, and the protagonist of the novel, returns to India after five years as Thompson revisited India in 1936-37. He came to India to examine the impact of changing conditions of Christian mission. From this visit to India he knew that the whole epoch of British-India was about to be finished. His mood in 1937 and 1938 was part elegiac and part mystic. He saw the great British Raj taking its place alongside the Moguls and other conquerors its memory falling back into oblivion. In this mood he wrote An End of the Hours (1938). In the same year <sup>he</sup> published another novel Youngest Disciples (1938), narrated the life and the teachings of the Buddha. His last novel John Arnison was published in 1939. It is also his semi-autobiographical book.

#### IV-D Expository Writings

Thompson was a very prolific writer and he wrote many books of topical interest about India. The foremost among these are his two books - Rabindranath Tagore. : His life and work (1921) and Rabindranath Tagore ; Poet and Dramatist (1926). Thompson's friendship with Tagore was a complex thing and recently much light has been thrown on the - Psychological problems resulting out of Thompson's continuous attempts to befriend Tagore and Tagore's strange treatment meted out to

Thompson. Thompson's son E.P. Thompson has written a touching book about these complications.<sup>19</sup>

Thompson wrote an important book on India in 1924-25. The Other Side of the Medal was a radical, historical reinterpretation of the 'Mutiny' of the 1857. Thompson realised that the Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre was a sort of reaction to the happenings of 1857. He feels that there is a need to put forth the Indian case and accept the fact that Indians had valid reasons for their grievances against the English. 'The Other Side' is the Indian side which had so far received scant attention from the British. Concluding his book Thompson says -

"There is no commoner word on Indian lips today than atonement. England. . . has never made atonement and she must do it before we can be friends".<sup>20</sup>

Benita Parry's comment on the book says that -

". . . Thompson aspired, the work is in fact a powerfully presented polemic, neither wholly academic nor entirely propagandist, which in its combination of historical perspective and moral concern makes it something of a classic amongst British writings on India".<sup>21</sup>

A History of India (1927-28) places the emphasis on the British work in India and in this book Thompson appeals to Indians :

"not to continue extravagant laudation of their past or their spiritual qualities in order to detract from the British reconstruction of India."<sup>22</sup>

In 1928, Thompson wrote 'Suttee' a study of the Hindu custom of burning widows on the funeral pyre of the dead husbands. In the next year appeared an essay Crusader's Coast. The Reconstruction of India (1930) marks Thompson's moving sympathy for Indian cause and the defence of his own people, defence of the Raj. It was directed at an 'American Audience'<sup>23</sup> which he thought, was misinformed on the subject of Indian nationalism and the British Raj. In 1932 he published A Letter from India. It is the outcome of his Indian tour of 1932, an outline of his ideas for the encouragement of Indian regional literature. It deals with the episode of the 'Amritsar Massacre'. He gives an account of the incident, true picture of the complex situation in India upon Gandhi's arrest. The Rise and Fulfilment of British Rule in India, written in 1934 in collaboration with G.T. Garratt, is a comprehensive history of the Raj from 1599 to 1933. He himself states that it is a good book than An Indian Day. In a letter written to Nehru he says -

"I wish your Universities instead of An Indian Day, a mere novel, would use The Rise and Fulfilment. That is a good book".<sup>24</sup>

In 1935, he published Sir Walter Raleigh: The Last of the Elizabethans & in 1937, The Life of Charles Lord Metcalfe, in 1939 You Have Lived Through All This. It is his the finest historical work. Soon afterwards he published Enlist India for Freedom (1940) which he dedicated to the memory of C.F. Andrews. He takes up now the theme of social and political conditions in India and seeks answers to the questions like -

"What is national congress? What were its ministeries? Why were they withdrawn? ... What is the present situation in India? ...?"<sup>25</sup>

Before 1940 Thompson thought that India was unable to govern herself. But after 1940 he began to think that India could also govern herself.

"I do not understand what constitute's fitness for natural right. India's neighbours Siam, Tibet, Nepal, Iran are independent ... because they are fit for self government .... I have often wondered if the British are fit for self government".<sup>26</sup>

Thompson's literary career can be divided into three periods -

- 1) 1907-1920 - The Pre-Indian period, herein he wrote poetry.
- 2) 1921-1926- Most of the novels were written in this period.
- 3) 1940-1946- Written in this period/ <sup>were</sup> the Expository writings.

Really he was an expert on Indian affairs. "Thompson published over sixty volumes about half of which are related to India."<sup>27</sup>

In spite of this detailed and varied consideration of the Indian cause according to Michael Edwardes Thompson's Indian novels have remained "unjustly neglected".<sup>28</sup>

Comparing Thompson's achievement with that of E.M. Forster, Edwardes exposes Forster by making the perceptive observation -

"E.M. Forster's A Passage to India uses few Indian words, probably because of the author's inability in spite of the 'UNCRITICAL PRAISE LAVISHED UPON THE WORK - to understand either India itself or the world of the British in India'.<sup>29</sup> (emphasis mine).



Notes and References

1. K.R. Srinivas Iyengar, "British Influence on Indian Thought", Indo-British Review, Vol. 4, No. 3, 1977.
2. Mahajan and Sethi, British Rule in India and After : 1707 : 1956, S. Chand & Co., Delhi, 1958.
3. See Allen J. Greenberger's, The British Image of India : A study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960, London, O.U.P. 1969.  
Greenberger divides his study of Anglo-Indian fiction into three periods (1) Era of Confidence, (2) Era of Doubt and (3) Era of Melancholy.
4. See Stephen Hemenway's, The Novel of India : The Anglo-Indian Novel, Vol.I., A writer's Workshop publication, 1975.  
He uses the words 'Anglo-Indian' and 'British' interchangeably 'to denote those Englishmen who were born in or went to India and wrote novels about the country'.
5. Charles Allen in Plain Tales from the Raj, London : Futura, 1975, P.21. He says that "the word Anglo-Indian" was applied originally to all the British in India but was officially adopted in 1900 to describe persons of mixed descent, then known as Eurasians". Benita Parry (1972) also uses the term 'Anglo-Indian' to mean the British Community in India but offers the following information, "after 1916 the term was officially applied to persons formerly known as Eurasians, but it continued to be used

in its original meaning ... until independence".

6. E.F. Oaten in a 'Sketch of Anglo-Indian Literature, London, 1908. He uses the term to cover all writing in English about India without making any distinction between Indians writing in English and Englishmen expressing their Indian experience. George Sampson in A Concise Cambridge History of English Literature, Cambridge ELBS, 1965, groups alongwith Kipling such Indian writers as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Sarojini Naidu.
7. Susanne Howe, Novel of Empire, New York : Columbia University Press, 1949.
8. Jefferey Meyers, Fiction and Colonial Experience, Totowa; New Jersey : Rowman and Littlefield', 1938.
9. Ruth P. Jhabvala, "Myself in India" in An Experience of India, London : John Murray, 1966, P.7.
10. In An Indian Day, Hamar, the protagonist was in Gurkha regiment, in Mesopotamia Palestine and sent to the Lowland Division as a Staff Captain and returned in 1921 to India. Robert Alden in A Farewell to India, is an acting principal of a college in charge of Douglas. These are the facts from the life of Thompson himself which get reflected in his novels.
11. Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru, (1958) p.210.
12. Mahatma Gandhi called Thompson "a prisoner of India".

13. Benita Parry, (1972), P.164.
14. *ibid*, P.181.
15. Mulk Raj Anand "Anglo-Saxon Attitudes : Twentieth Century English Fiction about India" in The Image of India in Western Creative Writing, Edited by M.K. Naik, Desai, Kallapur, Karnatak University, Madras 1970, P.25.
16. Sujit Mukherjee, (1993), P.112.
17. See Thompson's letter to Tagore, 26, November, 1933.
18. Pandit Nehru, (1958), p.303.
19. E.P. Thompson, Alien Homage : Edward Thompson and Rabindranath Tagore, Oxford University press, Delhi, 1993.
20. Edward Thompson, The Other Side of the Medal, Hogarth Press, London, 2nd Edition 1926, p.131 (First Published - 1925).
21. Benita Parry, (1972) p.177-78.
22. Shamsul Islam, (1979), p.47.
23. *ibid*, p.47.
24. Pandit Nehru, (1958), p.441. (Letter dated April 28, 1940 to Nehru).
25. Edward Thompson, Enlist India for Freedom, London, Victor Gollancz Ltd., 1940, p.6 (preface).
26. Edward Thompson, *ibid* p.91.

27. Harish Trivedi, See the 'Introduction' to Thompson's Rabindranath Tagore : Poet and Dramatist, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, p.95.
28. Michael Edwardes, (1967), p.317.
29. *ibid*, p.317.