CRY THE PEACOCK
AS A POETIC NOVEL

— Darshan Singh Maini

The contemporary Indian reality, of necessity, lends itself more readily to a realistic and ironic treatment in fiction, and that’s why most of the novels written in English as also in the Indian vernaculars tend to become direct and simple transcriptions of life. The nature of the socio-political matrix, and the resultant tensions characteristic of a society struggling for a viable stance in an absurd and impossible situation would indeed prove a rich quarry for the novelist given to documentation and comic invention. In a manner of speaking, there is never a settled society any time any where, for the relative absence or attenuation of conflict in a given period would, on a closer scrutiny, turn out to be a false breather, or a phoney interregnum. Thus the realistic comedy of manners has always had a condition ready to hand, if only a satirist or an ironist could exploit it in terms of art and drama. When the picture is informed by a social passion for freedom, justice and values, the same situation then could serve as a ground for pathos, and in more capable hands even for high tragedy. In short, what determines the form of the novel is the predisposition of the shaping imagination.

However, in the beat and flux of social life, there always abides a residual, organic, mythopoetic element which defies change. It indeed conditions the psychic continuum. In a country as ancient as India with roots reaching down to a primordial plane, such an element will always exercise a subliminal fascination. Poetry alone could render it adequately, for it belongs to the irrational side of life and the mystery of things. If a novel seeks to evoke it, it inevitably turns poetic in the process. When poetry subsumes philosophy as in Raja Rao’s The Serpent and the Rope, the result is a great novel despite its amorphous structure. When it remains a seminal impulse seeking gratification in drama as in Anita Desai’s Cry the Peacock, the outcome is an extended ode in prose. If the latter fails to achieve greatness, it is because the drama is not potent and varied enough to carry the burden of sustained lyricism. Or, to put it differently, the poetry here has
not found an efficient 'objective correlative'. Nevertheless, _Cry the Peacock_ has, within its limited range, the quality of a _tour de force_, and compels admiration for the sheer grain and pith of its poetic potential.

Obviously, such a novel is wholly different from the type of social comedy R. K. Narayan continues to write with felicity, or from the type of fiction inspired by socialist realism such as Mulk Raj Anand wrote with distinction and power in the 'thirties'. Anita Desai is not a child of the Indian Renaissance in that _Cry the Peacock_ is very superficially concerned with the _Zeugest_. The themes of alienation and void, of destiny and death which she seeks to orchestrate in this book would naturally suggest an older and authentic ancestry. In a sense, she would seem to connect with the modern Existentialists, though I trust, her responses are almost wholly indigenous, even if influences are not. The modernity of the novel resides mostly in the psychological, para-Freudian treatment of grief, suffering and release.

And this brings me to the slender substance of _Cry the Peacock_ which, in fact, is potentially a _nouvelle_ if not a long short story. It is divided into three parts, Part I and Part III being a 3-page and a 7-page affair respectively. It would have been perhaps more appropriate to style these two parts as Prologue and Epilogue, for that's what they really are. Told in the third person, they are the novelist's account of the heroine's state of mind before and after the climactic event towards which the story marches inexorably in Part II. And significantly, the story is related in the first person by Maya, the protagonist of the novel. The technique succeeds, chiefly because Part III which contains an account of her derangement as a result of a traumatic shock needed to be told by some one other than Maya, whereas the central story with its wave-like, sinuous movement is aptly put in the mouth of the heroine herself. The centrality of her truth being essentially subjective, the protracted agony of a lacerated psyche could thus be best rendered through her own consciousness, and in her own idiom. The correspondence between theme and technique thus becomes integral and metaphorical.

Part I opens on a note of death—the death of Maya's dog, Toto—which like a raven of ill-omen and ineluctable destiny hovers over the house in Delhi all through the substantive and
central Part II. *Cry the Peacock* could perhaps be described as an inverted overture to *thanatos*. It is not as if Maya is "half in love with easeful Death," though there are hints of a dark impulsion from within to warrant such a conclusion. On the contrary, she is achingly responsive to the beauty and poetry of life, and it is her flight from the shades which gives an edge to her funeral fears and musings. Her husband, Gautama, nearly twice her age and a respectable, reputed lawyer would, on the other hand, have nothing to do with what he calls the "hocus-pocus......... childish trimmings......... frills ........morbidity and frivolities" of the Indian occupation with death. He cannot understand the "to-do" about it. That his young but childless wife should be grieving profoundly over the loss of a dog is something distasteful to him. For him it was simply a clinical affair, a question merely of carting the corpse away for cremation by the scavenging section of the Public Works Department.

Thus in the very beginning is the theme of husband-wife alienation brought to the fore. Whereas Gautama is an efficient, pragmatic, unsentimental person, a 'thinking reed' in short, Maya, as her name indicated, is not only a creature of graceful illusions; but also a creature of song, dance and flower. It is as complete a polarity as one could imagine. They operate on wholly different psychic beams. One is reminded of Mr. and Mrs. Ramsay in Virginia Woolf's beautifully organized novel, *To the Lighthouse*,—the husband, a University don, ratiocinative, theoretical and shut, and the wife, warm, intuitive and open, a woman of immediacies, epiphanies and luminosities. This essential lack of communion between Maya and Gautama, however, remains a private and personal tragedy. As Maya realizes, sex is impotent "where not union but communion is concerned". Anita Desai does not seem to explore the metaphysical and existential ramifications of the problem. Nor does she connect it with the theme of incommunication, typical of recent fiction and drama in the West. Here the loneliness is chiefly a lyric emotion, innocent of philosophical significance.

As the graph of her anguish following the death of Toto is sketched Maya's past life in her father's house in Lucknow comes back as a throng of memories, wave upon wave upon wave. As a child brought up in an atmosphere of Urdu and Persian poetry, of *ayahs* and servants and hill resorts—a point, she is often twitted with
by her husband—she has come to regard life as an exercise in refinement. But one memory like a nodule of pain has ever since the occurrence been throbbing in her consciousness—the memory of a fateful meeting with an albino astrologer who had predicted death for one of the spouses four years after her marriage. The death of Toto has queered the pitch; she has visions of her own dissolution and extinction.

The treatment of her memories, fears, anguish and death-fixation is wholly psychological, and is, on the whole, a tribute to Anita Desai’s powers of poetry and penetration. Even a cursory analysis of the pervasive imagery will reveal the inner, integral character of Maya’s experience as rendered by the novelist. The reiterative nature of the moon, drum, desert, rodent and lizard imagery (an imagery of insanity, hysteria, aridity and slimness) in relationship to the heroine’s premonition of death, and of the bird, fruit, flower, tree and wind imagery in relationship to her childhood felicities clearly establishes the psychological pattern. In fact, the poetry here is released as a result of the tension between the two sets of imagery intersecting each other. As the agony of apprehended death rises to a maddening crescendo, and the “wild” and “white” horses of perdition go careering into the void, we see at the same time wisps of tender and fragile memories floating in Maya’s mind:

“Wild horse, white horse, galloping up paths of stone, flying away into the distance, the wild hills. The heights, the dizzying heights of my mountains, towering, tapering, edged with cliff-edges, founded on rock. Fall, fall, gloriously fall to the bed of racing rivers, foaming seas. Horrid arms, legs, tentacles thrashing, blood flowing eyes glazing. Storm-storm, at sea, at land! Fury. Whip. Lash. Fly furiously Danger! The warning ringing rings and echoes, from far, far, far. Run and hide, run and hide—if you can, miserable foal Ha, ha, Fool, fool, fool.

And during all this nightmare of animated and induced suffering, Maya drifts farther and farther away not only from her husband and home, but also from reality. The parties and cabarets bore her to tears; her husband’s relations, and their tittle-tattle leave
her cold and empty. She descends into the hideous well of loneliness and unreality where the only echoes are those of the albino’s dread prophecy and of the peacock’s shrill cries of death in the moment of love and orgasm. The imagery of pit, corridor and well would suggest her dread of isolation and darkness.

"Upon this bed of hot, itching sand, I summoned up again the vision of the tenebrific albino who had cast his shadow like a net across me as I had fled down the corridor of years, from the embrace of protection to embrace of love, yet catching me as surely as a giant fisherman striding through the shallows of moonlit seas, throws his fine net with one brief, expert motion and knows, as it settles with a falling whisper upon the still water, that he will find in it a catch: I had not escaped. The years had caught up, and now the final, the decisive one held me in its perspiring clasp from which release seemed impossible. And now I recalled that oil-sick, sibilant tongue whispering poetry to me in the bat-tortured dark. ‘Do you not hear the peacocks call in the wilds? Are they not blood-chilling, their shrieks of pain? “pia, pia”, they cry “Lover lover. Mio, mio, —I die, I die”. Go out into the jungles before the monsoons come—at the time when the first clouds cross the horizon, black as the kohl in your grave eyes. How they love the rain—these peacocks! They spread out their splendid tails and begin to dance, but, like Shiva’s their dance of joy is the dance of death, and they dance, knowing that they and their lovers are all to die, perhaps even before the monsoons came to an end. Is it not agony for them? How they stamp their feet, and to beat their beaks against the rocks! They will even grasp the snakes that live on the sands there and break their bodies to bits against the stones, to ease their own pain."
Have you seen peacocks make love, child? Before they mate, they fight. They will rip each other’s breasts to strips and fall, bleeding, with their beaks open and panting. When they have exhausted themselves in battle, they will mate. Peacocks are wise. The hundred eyes upon their tails have seen the truth of life and death, and know them to be one. Living they are aware of death. Dying, they are in love with life. “Lover, lover”, you will hear them cry in the forests, when the rain clouds come, “Lover, I die”.... ....

The peacock symbol, I may add, is poetically used throughout the novel.

Maya’s precarious hold on sanity is fast slipping and to ward off madness appears impossible.

Am I gone insane? Father! Brother! Husband!

“Who is my saviour? I am in need of one. I am dying, and I am in love with living. I am in love, and I am dying, God, let me sleep, forget, rest. But no, I will never sleep again. There is no rest any more only death and waiting.

The ‘Father! Brother! Husband! trinity is strongly suggestive of Emily Dickinson’s Burglar’, Banker, father” metaphor in one of her celebrated little poems on death. It may not be irrelevant to point out here that the American poet too was death-fixated and had an exquisite lyric sensibility.

As the story in Part II proceeds—there is, in fact, no real progression in terms of incident or action despite the somewhat gratuitous and belated bestowal upon Maya of a brother called Arjuna, who had walked out on his aristocratic and fastidious father in the first flush of his political awakening—the lyricism in Anita Desai gets the better of the drama. In this respect, I consider Cry the Peacock as a flawed novel, weak in social structuring and deficient in significant action. What little-sociology and politics are there appear unconsumed in the texture of the story. To cite
one example of the dangers of etiolation resulting from a runaway lyricism, I may point out that the cities of Delhi and Lucknow hardly ever come to life in the book. They are vague presences in the mind rather than realized entities. Nor is there much trace of metropolitan poetry as such. It is as if the novel had taken off vertically, and could sustain itself only through sheer virtuosity. There is always the danger of a precipitate fall from the heights.

As the black and sultry mood of hushed expectancy deepens, and the ominous signs begin to multiply, one can see the novel, like its demented heroine, panting for a cloud burst and relief. The fury of the dust-storm towards the end of the story matches the fury of the emotional tornado whipping Maya and blowing her about.

"Now I stood in the midst of it, I exulted and raised my arms to return its impassioned embrace. If the closed windows protected me from its whiplash and scorpion sting, it still allowed me the sensation of standing waist deep in the centre of the churning broil, of having plunged with grabbing hands and rapacious teeth into the heart of a gigantic melon ruby-red, juice-jammed and womb-warm from its baking sand-bed. Red, red, ruby-red was the dust—as though I were looking at it through lowered lids. But, no my eyes were open, wide. I was gazing through scarlet-coloured glasses that were occasionally rose-red, and ranged freely from nicotin-yellow to iodine-brown as well, and from burnt orange to livid pink, like one's most private flesh laid bare. The time of faded flowers, of strangled lives, of parched vision, of hesitation and despair was over. Here was a turmoil, a wild chiaroscuro of even-hot colours that churned over and over in a heat-swelled bubble around me. It revolved around me, about me, it was mine, this life was mine."
“Here was a carnival to enjoy, merry-go-rounds and roller-coasters, brass-bands, fried-food stalls, cavorting clowns. Giggling, I rushed from window to window beating upon them as though to beat them open. I did not need to do so for the dust seeped in through the barest cracks, and the furniture was already covered with a thickening layer of gritty, grey-white sand. It was suffocating, yes, for the heavy curtains, the unnecessary cushions, the foolish bric-a-brac, all held and smothered the dust in their dark folds, so that the house reeked of it, as a vast, sombre, bat-festooned tomb, and the odour in my nostrils had intimations of burial.

The passage quoted above incidentally reveals both the strength and weakness of Anita Desai’s prose style. Whilst at her best she in several memorable passages, achieves a rich, limpid, chromatic and elegant style that has a rare lambency about it, the frequent use of Keatsian compound-epithets tends to make it at times heavy and strained. Where she can control her lyricism, the style is perfectly suited to the theme. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that finally it is the poetic style which keeps afloat an otherwise thin and elongated story.

The dust storm is spent but Maya keyed up falls into a mood of wild abstraction, with a pale, sickly moon like a ‘demon lover’ inviting her to the abyss. Before she knew, she had taken the fatal step.

“And then Gautama made a mistake—his last, decisive one. In talking, gesturing he moved in front of me, thus coming between me and the worshipped moon, his figure an ugly, crooked grey shadow that transgressed its sorrowing chastity. ‘Gautama’: I screamed in fury, and thrust out my arms towards him, out at him, into him and past him, saw him fall then, pass through an immensity of air, down to the very bottom.
Maya had proved the albino astrologer right; had in fact been made an instrument of her own crazy destiny! The wheel of irrationality had come full circle.

In Part III, we see Maya, not through her own eyes, but as an elfin spirit in the ancestral house in Lucknow, with the strange peace and security of a soul that has crossed the border. Whilst the house has "the air of appalling scandal" about it, we watch "the enigma of the blithe, child-like serenity of the girl, Maya". But if her child-self is released, the darkness within could suddenly overwhelm and blot out the universe as well.

Then they heard the patter of a child’s laughter cascading up and down the scales of some new delight—a brilliant peacock’s feather perhaps? Then it stopped suddenly, and they heard a different voice calling, shrilly and desperately from some unimaginable realm of horror, calling out in great dread.

The road ahead of Maya inevitably points in the direction of "the asylum".

_Cry the Peacock_ is a typically 'feminine' novel, not because it is the story of a woman told by a woman, but because like a Jamesian nouvelle, though with little of the Jamesian vision and architectonics, it is the fruit of a feminine sensibility. It has the quality of an orchid and a flute about it. Its concern is wholly with the twilight zone of mind as also with nostalgia and dream, and it achieves its effects through a series of exploding and multiplying metaphors.

There is a marked element of poetry in all great fiction—we have it in Dickens, Hardy, Meredith, James, George Eliot, Conrad, Galsworthy, Proust, and in scores of other novelists—but a truly poetic novel such as Emily Bronte’s or Virginia Woolf’s or D. H. Lawrence’s works on a different level of response as well as construction. It has no hard contours, and it seeks to capture the shimmeriness and fluidity of life, and the wash and swing of things. What is more important, the novelist here apprehends reality in a non-rational poetic manner. Anita Desai, as I have said earlier is deficient in historical and sociological awareness, and her power
of invention is severely limited. Nor do the archetypal and symbolic names of Maya, Gautama and Arjuna really give her story the expected metaphysical strength. She hasn’t the concreteness and solidity and vision of a Lawrence, or the complexity and range of a Virginia Woolf. She doesn’t belong in the same street. But I guess, she would not be regarded as an interloper there. And saying that is indeed saying a great deal.
CHRONICLES OF KEDARAM: 
A QUESTION OF FORM

— M. G. Krishnamurthi.

In his foreword to the Chronicles of Kedaram Mr. Hilton Brown observes that the novel "presents an utterly convincing picture of life in a South Indian District headquarters, centring round the local Bar, but ramifying, of course, to other sections of the community......... It is as a picture, artistic rather than photographic, of local life that it seems to me to excel. There it is in the family of Main Street and Cranford and the Annals of the Parish." 1 Mr. Brown seems to extol the realism of the novel, and though I have no quarrel with him, it seems to me that the novel succeeds because the "realistic" details form parts of a non-realistic design. The Chronicles, like the works of Raja Rao and G. V. Desani, is one of the few fascinating experiments in the form of fiction, a kind of experiment which might solve some of the problems of the Indian novelist writing in English.

So with your permission I shall ride my own hobby horse, and try to raise some questions about the relationship between Nagarajan's theme or themes and the characteristic modes of communication he employs in his novel. I shall do so in the light of three... propositions: (1) In choosing to write in English, or to say the same thing in a mystical way and thus satisfy some of our Indo-Anglian writers, in letting English choose him, a successful Indian novelist often chooses a theme as well as a mode of communication. (2) In view of the special problems the Indian writer in English has to face with regard to idiom, audience, and the communication of the particular nuances of a sens’b’lity for which English hasn’t been a traditional medium, the Indian fiction writer in English has to be concerned with the craft of fiction more than a writer in one of our languages needs to be. Of course I am not implying that an Indian novelist writing in one of our languages can afford to ignore form altogether. I simply mean that he can write great fiction without necessarily being an experimentalist and in my

own language area Mr. K. Shivarama Karanth is one such example. (3) The Indian novelist in English who is not content with a slick manipulation of the modes of the comedy of manners, has usually tended to be (a) a myth maker and symbolist like Raja Rao, (b) a skilful user of the "absurd" like G. V. Desani in his All about H. Hattert, and (c) a skilful exploiter of the common places of a culture like Narayan and Nagarajan.

It is with this last group, and particularly with K. Nagarajan that I am concerned. If the translations of Narayan into Kannada can be used as evidence, this kind of writing suffers in translation. And it suffers not on account of the so-called limitations of our languages, but largely due to its dependence on particular uses of English. In translation the common places appear so commonplace, the thematic limitations become so transparent, that one cannot get enthusiastic about such writing in translation. If I am asked to read even the most successful Indian novelist in English in translation I would probably find a study of the contemporary writing in my own language more satisfying. And in saying this I don't think I am being parochial. I am only saying that the Indo-Anglian novel has to be viewed as a separate entity whatever may be its relation to the novel in Indian languages or the novel in English.

The Chronicles is structurally very loose for a realistic novel, and probably Nagarajan knew what he was doing when he chose to call his book the Chronicles of Kedaram. He could be episodic, could use first person narration, and could deal with the theme of social change in a way that won't disrupt the dominant tone of the book. Though the humorous is the dominant tone, there is an undeniable element of nostalgia in the Chronicles. In the course of the book Koni, the narrator, remarks that the people of Kedaram had "tricked her out in gaudy raiment, but dear old thing, she carried on bravely. She is rather like some of our old-fashioned ladies who, to please their progressive sons and daughters, allow themselves to be dragged out of their seclusion to take part in the new-fangled entertainments, through which they sit and simper with a serenity which hides their inner discomposure" (p. 8) Koni cannot hide his "inner discomposure", but the discomposure does not make him wander in search of a mythical home. His responses to almost all the events he describes are different from those of his friends in Kedaram, and hence his
ability to accept the "new" Kedaram seems to be related to the adequacy of the stereotypes Nagarajan skilfully employs in his book. The two important stereotypes are the temple of Kedareswar and Koni's parents.

Towards the end of the book Koni visits the temple and since the description of the temple indicates the use to which it is put permit me to quote at some length:

That afternoon I could not rest. Conflicting thoughts raced through my mind which was in a whirl...........

In the evening I went to Kedareswar's temple as was my habit whenever I was agitated and wished to collect my thoughts. I washed my hands and feet at the lily-pond and made my evening salutation to the sun, sitting on the platform built round the sacred pipul tree on the water's edge. It was a scene of calm and peace. The western sky was a splash of red and gold and vermilion behind the line of the Shyamagiris........ Many an evening had Vasu and I spent there, making plans and discussing our affairs, both schoolboy and adult. Now Vasu was far away, I could not help saying to myself for the hundredth time, on a wholly unnecessary trip abroad. I missed him and his wife, his son, Mani, and the baby, Tara. And Nirmala—an intriguing question mark........ At one time I had my suspicions but every time suspicion reared its head, the sight of her face or even the memory of it, extinguished it........ Strangely enough, though she had been at Kedaram for over a decade, she did not seem to belong to it......

As though in answer to my prayers, the bells of Kedareswar's rang the summons to evening worship, when lighted camphor would be waved before the deity and sacred ash and saffron handed round ........ The mood of
reminiscence into which I had been lullèd by the peaceful, evening hour, had helped to still my agitated nerves and the sight of the young moon, bright and playful like a child, revived me. I stood gazing, when the temple bells pealed again. I turned round and hastened to receive the sacred offerings.

I felt at peace (pp. 251—252).

In the context of the novel one cannot dismiss this as a journalistic purple patch because the temple is, for Koni, a symbol of something permanent and hence the peace that his aesthetic and religious responses to the temple bring him, is not just the peace of withdrawal. The temple, like his parents, symbolizes for Koni some eternal verities which give meaning to his life and which help him accept his experiences. He hasn’t understood the meaning of his experiences—the changes that have taken place in Keda-ram and the nature of Vasu’s relationship with Nirmala. No questions have been answered and the peace Koni gets is probably due to the role the temple and his parents play in strengthening the ingrained quality of his traditional mind to make peace even with those aspects of life which conflict with his own attitudes and beliefs.

Koni is no saint who can be used as a stock figure of one who has achieved “the peace that passeth understanding”. His passivity is neither the passivity of a saint nor of Narayan’s Raju. Probably his responses to the temple and to his parents help him keep his connections with traditional mores unbroken. The temple and Koni’s parents can help him do this because they are sufficiently distanced from most of the events in the Chronicles. So Hemadri’s description of Koni as “the master of the cliche and the common place” (p 103) and Koni’s comment “I did not bother to tell him that what he, in his superior way, tried to be little as a cliche and a common place was but the crystallized wisdom of the ages” (p. 103) indicate two opposite responses to that “wisdom” or to those stereotypes of traditional attitudes to life. But the stereotypes cannot function as they do in the book if the two responses are antagonistic. As a matter of fact, none of the characters in the Chronicles is so alienated from the traditional folk culture as to disrupt the lines of communication between the old and the new.
No one in this book is comparable to Raja Rao’s Ramaswamy in his love-hate relationship with the specifics of his own culture.

I don’t say this to belittle Raja Rao but only to emphasize the different modes of *The Serpent and the Rope* and the *Chronicles of Kedaram* as novels and as possible documents of our cultural history. Compare Raja Rao’s use of his narrator’s grandfather, father and stepmother with Nagarajan’s use of Koni’s parents, and the differences between the two books are clear. In the 9th section of the 5th chapter of the *Chronicles* we read—“If all Brahmins were only as guileless and truly orthodox as my parents, there would be no Brahmin-Non-Brahmin problem at all, he (Hemadri) used to say, and I knew it was no idle compliment. He meant it” (p. 148). A little later Koni says that his parents “belonged to the childhood of the world, so did most of their generation” (p. 162). Koni’s parents are not mythical characters who are used as devices to indicate the nature of the central character’s problems of self-definition. They are “idealized” types and they function the way they do in the book because they typify some of the values at least nominally accepted by the society to which they belong.

Koni’s parents are gullible just as the other saintly old man, Mahatma Gandhi, is gullible; but this gullibility does not make them less saintly and the existence of the temple and these two old people is enough to suggest to Koni the possibility of a satisfying organization of life and thus bring him a sense of peace. One can even say that life is acceptable for Koni because he has known them.

A pertinent question to which I have no answer is — “How are these stereotypes made acceptable to the reader?” Probably Nagarajan’s skilful exploitation of tone and idiom has something to do with this. The dominant tone is one of banter and Nagarajan mimics with remarkable success the idiom of the English-knowing Indian who has read in college the usual texts — *The Vicar of Wakefield*, *Pickwick Papers* and Shakespeare. The dated idiom and the Gilbert and Sullivan touches seem to serve a specific purpose. Probably I can illustrate this with the help of Koni’s description of the temple:

> In Kedaram it is the temple which is the centre of life. It is the unchanging axis on which the life of the city revolves. The tutelary
deity of the place, *pace* the *Vaishnavites* in Kedareswar who, in a worldly, sculptural sense, is co-eval with Kedaram itself. We have never wavered in our allegiance to him; he is the unseen being who broods over the place like a mystic dove and guards us from evil, war and pestilence.

If you look at it carefully, you will be surprised at the number of points where the temple touches our lives. It is as ubiquitous as the law, even more so. You may say that Kedareswar enters your daily life with the milkman who comes at dawn, and does not leave it even when night falls and the household goes to sleep. For when you have said your prayers, and gone to bed, he is about, lest you sneeze and seek his aid (p. 38).

I don’t think the last sentence is there simply because the comic mode requires it. It is probably connected with the attitudes that most of the English-knowing characters in the book have in common. I don’t know if it is altogether unfair to say that these English-knowing characters, including the narrator, try to keep some of their beliefs outside the pale of rational discussion. As a matter of fact there is very little of rational discussion in the highly articulate English-knowing set in the book. The set seems to be held together largely by custom, habit and unexamined assumptions so the dialogue is clever mimicry, banter and gossip and verbal communication can remain on a very elementary level.

The one exception is of course Nirmala, and significantly she remains as enigma throughout the *Chronicles*. As Koni observes, "strangely enough though she had been at Kedaram for over a decade, she did not seem to belong to it" (p. 252). Koni is hardly the type to understand her and he can accept her fully when he learns that she has joined the Sabarmati Ashram. She has become understandable because she has become a type: "I re-read the letter, not once, not twice, but many times. I showed it to Alamelu, whose tears came streaming down her face. 'What a sweet woman! I do not know a sweeter,' she sobbed.
"I put the letter away in my private drawer. My eyes were wet, too" (p. 251).

If the *Chronicles* of Kedaram gives us a sense of a community even though most of the characters belong to one caste only, it does so probably because of Nagarajan’s ability to convert these types into certain stereotypes of Hindu society. His writing in English has probably helped him to deal with the theme of social change in this particular way. I wonder if he could have “ideal-ized” his parents in his native Tamil without becoming sentimental. This is necessarily speculative, but when I compare this particular treatment of the theme with two successful treatments of it in Kannada, Karanth’s *Marali Manige* (Back to the Soil) and U. R. Ananthamurthy’s *Samskāra* the differences are so striking in details as well as in conception that they do not seem to be accidental.

These differences probably result from the writer’s choice of language. Since English has developed in a “non-Hindu” cultural complex certain details, stereotypes and even words and phrases when skilfully employed, can trigger into existence a non-English culture. For instance, Narayan’s bare descriptions of a middle-class South Indian household, Raja Rao’s use of Sanskrit words and phrases and his direct translations of Kannada idioms, and Nagarajan’s descriptions of the temple and Koni’s parents do much more for their novels than they can for the novels of one writing in an Indian language. I don’t think any one would get excited when he comes across the word “Ganga” or a Sanskrit śloka in a novel in one of our languages. But when we come across these in Raja Rao or when he uses the phrase “little mother” something seems to happen to an Indian reader. An uncomfortable question — “do we respond to these words and phrases the way we do because of ‘the shock of recognition’ or because we are, in some subtle ways, so alienated from our own culture, that like Henry James, we can recognize the value of a native culture only when it is distanced from us? Probably this is unfair, but we cannot let nostalgia and sentimentality affect our critical judgements. The more “Indian” an Indian writer in English is, the more hard-headed we ought to be in assessing his work.

But the subdued “Indianness” of Nagarajan’s the *Chronicles of Kedaram* does not raise these questions. The quiet assurance that
the traditional Hindu mores are sound, an assurance we may not share with Nagarajan, lets him "play", and portray in subdued colours one of the tremendous themes of a fiction writer in India, the theme of cultural transformation.
Keralite, perhaps brings to the eyes of the passing traveller a land of tiny fishing villages where clusters of mop-headed coconut palms shelter the thatched cottages and the deep and dark-blue sea embellished as it were with boats and yachts gliding softly silhouetted against the azure sky affords a vast, massive background. To the common reader, Kerala perhaps conjures up a land of a multitude of starving denizens in the grip of an economic and political turmoil. But, to the man of the soil it throbs with a different life. A life which the author of Chemmeen has tried to capture and vivify.

Chemmeen is the sad and simple tale of the fishing girl Karuthamma in the tradition-bound village of Nirukkunnam. In love with a moslem boy Pareekutti since childhood she is compelled to marry Palani, a total stranger of her own community. The girl strives to forget her former love and lead a happy wedded life. But her instincts of a woman get the better of her duties of a wife and she is finally united with Pareekutti in death.

The story is simple, in a way conventional. The life depicted is of a given period and of a certain class of people—the fisherfolk. It is perhaps worthwhile to ponder in this context, whether inspite of its simplicity it appeals to the modern reader endowed with a complex mind. Whether the work becomes dated and whether it transcends the regional barrier to have a universal appeal.

The novel commences with Karuthamma telling her lover Pareekutti on the seashore, “You know, my father is going to buy a fishing boat and a net, which will then be our own”. It is this ‘fishing boat and a net’ that is central to her father Cemban Kunju. So central is it that his wife and children are of secondary importance compared with it. This attitude of his spells doom on both Pareekutti and Karuthamma. The lovers know it not, for they are in a world of their own laughing all the time. This happiness we are made aware is to be shortlived, for the novelist reminds us,
"This kind of laughter sometimes ends in tears." And when Chakki utters the prophetic lines: "Some moslem boy will get your daughter into trouble. That is what is going to happen", to her husband, the tone and mood of the novel is set. It has been done in degrees, almost imperceptibly at first. As one peruses a few more pages, one gradually gets some insight into the fishermen's lives, their beliefs, ambitions and bickerings.

"There are four castes of fishermen—Arayan, Vallakkaran, Mukuvvan and Marakkan—as well as a lower fifth caste. There are also the fishermen of the backwaters inland." In the old days the Headman of the seafront permitted only a Vallakaran to buy a boat and net. Now the times are gradually changing. Chemban Kunju belongs to the Mukuvvan caste and he buys a boat without even seeking the Headman's permission although he meets and pays the Headman the customary tribute after he has bought the boat. He dares to launch his boat twice on the same day, a practice hitherto unknown and he emerges successful and without stern opposition from the rest of his society.

The fisherman's lot is a hard and precarious one. We are aware that Santiago in The Old Man and the Sea had set out for eighty-four days without catching a fish. And who can forget Maurya's lament in Riders to the Sea? "I've had a husband, and a husband's father, and six sons in this house—six fine men, though it was hard birth I had with everyone of them and they coming into the world—and some of them were found and some of them were not found, but they're gone now the lot of them." Similarly in Chemmeen the fishermen are beset with tragedies and are always in a state of poverty despite their hard work. Even during the Chakara season (the big event of the year) when Chemmeen—shrimp—is caught in abundance and trade is brisk and flourishing, the fishermen are at the mercy of the elements. Heavy rain can result in many fishing days being lost and the curing yards being waterlogged, thereby hampering the drying of fish sometimes even damaging the half-dry fish. Added to this, the fishermen by their thoughtlessness and shortsightedness bring misery upon themselves as is manifest in the fight that ensues between Chemban Kunju's crew and Palani's crew. Heads are broken, the police intervene and all the money made during the Chakara season vanishes. All this trouble and loss for the simple reason that Palani's men have done better at fishing than Chemban Kunju's men. But it is
mostly the vicissitudes of nature that the fishermen must guard
themselves against. If the conditions are favourable, the fishermen
have enough to live with, that is enough for another year.

It is therefore natural that under such conditions superstitions
and beliefs ride high. The fishermen owe their lives to the sea
for they are its dependents. But life on the sea is a perilous one
where terrible events occur suddenly and unexpectedly. Hence
the Preserver is also the Destroyer. The only way the fisherfolk
can safeguard their lives is to cling to certain beliefs and omens.
It is not only typical of the fishermen of Kerala to be superstitious
but perhaps the world over. Maurya runs round to the spring-
well to say good-bye to her son after she has forgotten to do so
earlier. The whalers on the Pequod in Moby Dick are a super-
stitious lot. And what of the Albatross and the Ancient
Mariner?

The sea to the men and women on the shore is not just a vast
sheet of water. It is a living entity. In The Old Man and the Sea’.
He (Santiago) always thought of the sea as la mar which is what
people call her in Spanish when they love her. Sometimes those
who love her say bad things of her but they are always said as though
she were a woman. Some of the younger fishermen... ... spoke
of her as el mar which is masculine. They spoke of her as a con-
testant or a place or even an enemy. But the old man always
thought of her as feminine and as something that gave or withheld
great favours”. In Chemmenn the fisherfolk hold no two opinions
of the sea and it is always treated with awe, respect and rever-
ence.

The Goddess Katalamma with her palace in the bottom of the
sea is the ruling deity and the one who orders the faith of the
people. She is a picture of terror. To reach her one had to get
through a whirlpool which made the whole sea churn round in
circles, knocking at the gates of her abode. She punishes the
wicked ruthlessly, dragging them down and sending sea monsters
to the shore as a warning of her fury. The most potent super-
stition is the story of the first fisherman who “fought with the waves
and currents of the sea single-handed on a piece of wood on the
other side of the horizon, his wife sat looking westward to the sea
and prayed with all her soul for his safety. The waves rose high
on the sea. The whales approached him with their mouths
gaping. The sharks charged the boat with their tails. The current dragged the boat into a terrible whirlpool. But he escaped from everything miraculously”. How was this possible? The fisherman was saved because a chaste and pure woman had prayed steadfastly for the safety of her husband at sea. The daughters of the sea knew the power of that prayer and the meaning of that way of life. The lives of the men at sea depended on their wives’ chastity. This belief appears again and again almost like a refrain throughout the novel for it is knit into their lives. In the end when Palani caught in the whirlpool and in the firm hands of death cries out “Karuthamma”, the belief is highlighted and is proved true, for Karuthamma at that very moment is in the arms of her lover, not praying for her husband. Hence Palani meets his inevitable end. The next day true to the other strongly prevalent belief, the waves are reported to have come right up to the front of some of the houses and there were sea-snakes to be seen on the white sands. One is perhaps now led to feel that the novelist believes in these superstitions and is promoting them through the novel. In answer to this one may cite the prophesy of the witches being fulfilled in Macbeth. Whether proved true or false, the events have really issued through the actions of the characters themselves, and not through external forces. A forte of the novel is that it seems to have been written from the inside. Elaborate descriptions are conspicuous by their absence. The novelist is more intent in revealing the attitudes and ways of the fishermen than merely describing their daily lives. Even Karuthamma’s wedding is not described elaborately. The novelist’s point of focus is elsewhere. It is in showing how the society has reacted to the wedding. “They all knew that Palani had no one close to him in this world, but the fact that there were no women in the bridegroom’s party was a shameful matter.”

When the novelist does describe an event, it is animated. Here is a picture of the fishermen returning with their catch. “By noon the seashore was lined with children and fisherwomen with their baskets. The traders were there too. Out at sea the gulls were hovering over the boats. It was clear that the nets were being gathered and the catch taken in. Everybody began to guess what kind of fish they were........ Suddenly two seagulls flew in from the sea. One had a fish in its beak. Everybody looked up: ‘It is sardines’ they cried.”
The novelist is not concerned merely to paint a picture of the sea and her dependents. His urge is to shed light on the souls of men, to reveal the manner in which they endure the rough and dangerous life at sea, never shirking the hazards. His acumen lies in rendering feeling and delineating character in the stress of daily life and presenting in authentic, graphic and dramatic detail, that which one can see and hear.

G. M. Treveleyan States, "Social History may be defined negatively as the History of a people with the politics left out." Future historians writing on Kerala would perhaps find a reading of Chemmeen rewarding for Sivasankara Pillai has given us rare insights into the life of these fishermen, a life which is bound to change with the march of time. This he has achieved in as few as a little over two hundred pages. It has been made possible by strict austerity and economy of words, giving the novel a concentration and immediacy usually to be found only in the realm of drama.

The controlling and organising power of the novelist is noteworthy. One situation leads to another logically, convincingly and without straining one's credibility.

Chakki has just swooned and is in a critical condition at her daughter's wedding. Chemban Kunju beats his chest with his hands imploring Palani to leave Karuthamma beside her mother; but Palani is adamant that his wife should, true to their age-old custom, accompany him home on the bridal night. What is the poor girl Karuthamma to do? She has been called upon to take a decision, a decision by which she has either to lose her mother or her husband. Even in a situation such as this, the novelist handles his characters with a sure and deft touch:

"Karuthamma went to Chakki and placed her face against her mother's and wept helplessly. Chakki was also crying. 'What did they ask you my child?' her mother asked her.

'I am not going, Mother,' Karuthamma managed to say between her sobs.

'Don't talk like that, my child,' Chakki said, 'You must go, if you don't go........'

Chakki knew what would happen if she didn't go. Karuthamma shared her fears."

But Karuthamma cannot leave her mother dying. Chakki however has her way. She slowly extricates Karuthamma from
her body, scolds her and finally delivers the blinding shot, "So you can't bear to leave Pareekutti, is it?" These words of suspicion coming from the lips of a dying mother to a daughter on her wedding day are too heavy for Karuthamma to bear. She musters some courage and strength, leaves the room and is ready to go with her husband. Similarly the novelist is able to marry Karuthamma to Palani in a manner in which Pareekutti neither feels betrayed nor is angry with his love. On the contrary, he understands her plight.

Chemmeen is a novel that deals with love and passion, instincts that are elemental in man. Karuthamma's love for Pareekutti is natural. She had played with him alone on the seashore ever since they were children and her affection for him had grown with the years until it reached a stage where one couldn't think of living without the other. Karuthamma's love for Pareekutti creates a problem for herself. She knows she ought not to marry a moslem, for that would be going against the wishes of her parents and community, and that she ought to keep aloof from him as well, for the Goddess Katalamma punished the unchaste most cruelly.

The night when Pareekutti is singing, she lies down on her face, covers her ears with her hands, yet that song cannot be shut out. His stave on the sea shore had gone right through her, it had given her a new kind of thrill. That voice swept away all her consciousness of good and bad. How could she resist it? She was after all made of flesh and blood. Karuthamma meets Pareekutti on many occasions on the lonely shore. The relationship between them is dwelt upon with sensitivity and restraint by the novelist:

"Is Karuthamma angry with me?" Pareekutti asked. She didn't say a word. Her heart was beating as if it might burst any moment.

'I won't talk to you if you don't wish it'. She wanted, in fact, to tell him so much, to ask so many questions. She even wanted to ask him if she could be converted to his religion.

She stood there in the shadow of the boat on the seashore. He could not take his eyes off her heaving breasts. And she did not ask him not to stare at her. Raising her face she said, 'Let me go, Muthalali'. But was Pareekutti holding her back? Could she not walk straight off?

'Somebody might see us', she said nervously. She took a few steps. Then she heard him call to her.
'Karuthamma'.

There was something unusual in that call, in that voice. Her ears and her heart experienced a new sensation. Karuthamma stood as if she had been halted suddenly. He did not come to her, though she expected him to do so.

They did not know, either of them, how long they stood like that. ........ ....... ........... ............. .......... ....

All of Pareekutti's hopes finally took the shape of one question.

'Karuthamma, do you love me?'

Without Karuthamma knowing it, the answer came forth.

'Yes'.

'And you love only me?'

'Yes, only you.'

Karuthamma is like most Indian girls of her age, shy. Most of her feelings are suppressed within, only when she can hold them no longer do they find expression and the feelings are articulated in all their simplicity. The fishermen are a simple folk and in accordance with the life they lead the language throughout the novel is simple.

Karuthamma's struggle within herself continues even after her marriage. When Pareekutti knocks at her door to convey the news of her mother's death to her, she is enraged.

"Even after I left home, you won't leave me in peace. No-no, I won't open the door. I don't want to see you."

But when he tells her that he has come to her as a brother she weakens psychologically and lets him in.

"He had given their abiding relationship a new form and a new name without destroying it. She felt as if she were a drowning man clutching at a straw." Her love for Pareekutti is irresistible. She cannot live without him.

When one reads, "Everyone she had come in contact with in her life was unhappy," one is immediately reminded of Maggie who most unwillingly makes Tom, Philip, Lucy and Stephen all unhappy by her actions in *The Mill on the Floss*. Both live only to experience the pain of love. And like Maggie who always wished that she was given another chance to rectify her mistakes, Karuthamma makes her life's confession to Palani. "Whatever happens I won't bring this baby up to be another Karuthamma." Both are sensitive souls contrasted with their common place sur-
roundings and it is this discrepancy that makes their lives tragic. There is one ostensible difference however. Although their struggle is the same, Maggie overcomes her longing for Stephen. Karuthamma in contrast yields to Pareekutti. But this does not necessarily imply that Karuthamma has fallen. The novelist is ambivalent, taking no sides and pronouncing no judgements. He is fully aware that the complexities of life do not make for neat formulas and firm prescriptions.

Karuthamma tells Pareekutti, "I shall return the money we borrowed from you before I go. And for your happiness, I shall

"Pray for you" was what she wanted to say. But she did not know whether it would be right of her to say it. 'A fisher-woman should pray for the good of only one man. The duty she owed her future husband would not permit her to pray for any other person.' It is true that her marriage was the beginning of a new chapter in her life. "But" asks the author, "could anyone say that the past had no place in it?" Towards the conclusion the author raises another important question: "When Palani was away at sea, was it right that she should stand talking to a stranger?" Karuthamma has no fears. They had met before many times in the darkness of night. "If she could give a man whose life she had crushed at least a moment's happiness, shouldn't she grant it?" This man loved her as no other. With him her life was full and now the same man stood in front of her beckoning to her. An enduring feature of the novel is perhaps the fundamental and vital questions raised in it. Questions which have remained burning issues since man and family originated.

Karuthamma's life is a story of agonising thought, of thought that seems to question every action. The other characters though not sketched to the same degree in complexity as Karuthamma, are nevertheless in the same mould. Pareekutti is not the idealised and typed lover although he sacrifices everything for Karuthamma. Pareekutti doesn't think of repayment when he gives the money to Chemban Kunju. It may not have been his sole intention to make the course of his love with Karuthamma run smoothly by making her parents obligated to him. Yet when Chakki says, "My son you must marry a nice girl have children and prosper in your trade. You must not trouble Karuthamma any longer. She is married, you are now her brother. As my
son you must accept her as your sister. I know you love Karuthamma. This is the test of your love.” Does not Pareekutti with all his sacrifice and love for Karuthamma fail in this test?

Chemban Kunju, who by his avarice brings misery and ruin upon his entire family and Pareekutti, has a streak of goodness in him. He has risen from a mere oarsman to the owner of two boats mainly through dint of hard work. As an oarsman he had organised his co-workers and raised their share from fifty to sixty percent of the catch to better their living. He ultimately repays Pareekutti the loan and at a stage when it is most difficult for him to do so.

Chakki is a woman brought up in the tradition of the seafront. She is the inheritor of some old truths and a way of life. Yet this woman on her death-bed clasps Pareekutti’s hands—-a moslem’s hands—and says “I never had the good fortune to bear a boy, but I have a son. You are my son Pareekutti.” Such noble gestures are possible in a caste-ridden world where one can transcend one’s own limitations. The novel is bestowed with local colour to make it authentic but then it is local and not provincial.

The fishermen at home are dwelt upon at length. Chemban Kunju and Chakki are happy together always co-operating and understanding. They have their differences but they are tided over. The full worth of Chakki is seen at best after her death when Chemban Kunju’s second wife enters his house. Chakki was a fisherwoman by birth and knew her chores as a fisherman’s wife. The second wife is the former wife of a boatowner and of a higher caste than Chemban Kunju’s. She is a misfit in her new house since she is not as hard-working and thrifty as Chakki but used to the ways of a more leisurely life. Chemban Kunju only brings unhappiness to himself and his daughter Panchami by marrying a second time.

The relationship between Nallapennu and Achakunju affords some humour. Their’s too is a happy wedded life but full of quarrels, with Nallapennu usually emerging victorious. The life that Karuthamma and Palani lead is a tempestuous one. Palani, orphaned at a tender age and who has just grown up as a son of the sea without any emotional or sentimental attachment to his fellow-beings, without an aim or ambition, is married to Karuthamma of a totally incompatible temperament. If Chemban
Kunju is unbending, so is Palani. He tells Karuthamma that unless her father himself approached him he wouldn’t ever set foot in her father’s house. “If he thinks he hasn’t a daughter any more, you should also think that you haven’t a father any more.” The pledge of security that he seems to give her is that, if she has lost a father, she has gained a husband. But Karuthamma can never acquiesce to this strange logic. The seedbed of all their quarrels is that she longs to see her dying mother and Palani will hear none of it. Despite their sharp differences they have their happy moments. Palani brings her a lovely piece of cloth with gold borders. He wants to see his wife finely dressed up. “Life isn’t merely a matter of essentials, of furnishing one’s home properly and putting by money. It has another side of it too.” We get glimpses of it even in this poor, ignorant fisherman Palani. Palani and Karuthamma make a sincere effort to lead a happy wedded life. But the society that they live in is a cruel one where old practices die hard and one man’s life is another man’s business. Rumours are quickly spread that Karuthamma is unchaste. The fishermen, fearing the worst will befall her husband, refuse to allow him into their boats to go fishing lest they be harmed as well by the Goddess Katalemma. Inspite of the isolated lives the couple lead, Palani assures his wife “I brought you home because I thought I could support you. Remember that you need not do anything.” Karuthamma cannot forget the day in her life. In fact it is the day she really becomes his wife. She lacked nothing. No wife on that seashore had a husband with more courage. Soon this same husband succumbs to the rumours afloat. He at first only suspects her of infidelity but gradually he convinces himself that it is the truth and makes it obvious to Karuthamma of his grave misgivings towards her. This has a revolutionary effect on her. Her values suddenly change. Until now she had been afraid of life because she wanted to cling to it. Now the urge for security disappears and her estrangement with Palani is developed slowly and surely with keen psychological insight.

Palani reveals the workings of the inner consciousness in the fisherman. He tells his wife. “A fisherman cannot save. This is because he makes his money at the cost of millions of lives. He makes his money by cheating and catching innocent beings moving freely in the sea.” We are further informed in the novel that this was not only Palani’s belief, but a belief shared by the fishermen.
all along the coast for hundreds of years. This fatalistic attitude
towards their profession is not only peculiar to the fishermen in
India, but to a few others like the toddy-sellers as well. Santiago
the fisherman in Old Man and the Sea too has reflections on his
profession. He ruminates "Perhaps it was a sin to kill the
fish. I suppose it was, even though I did it to keep me alive
and feed many people. Do not think about it.... ... You were
born to be a fisherman as the fish was born to be a fish." Attempt-
ing to explain it rather conveniently, he fails, and is betwixt for
a while. "You did not kill the fish only to keep alive and to sell
for food. You killed him for pride and because you are a fisher-
man. You loved him when he was alive and you loved him after.
If you love him, it is not a sin to kill him. Or is it more?" The
thought teases him and he finally dismisses it saying, "Everything
kills everything else in some way. Fishing kills me exactly as it
keeps me alive."

Ishmael in Moby Dick has no doubts about his profession and is
anxious to convince the reader that whaling is no disreputable
pursuit but an honourable vocation. One may call them butchers,
but then the same term would have to be employed to all the
generals and soldiers. And if anyone doubts the prowess of a
whaler one has only to go whaling with him to know that the ocean
with its whales is more than a battle-field. Besides, for many
years past the whaleship has been a pioneer, sailing in the remotest
and least known parts of the earth. The whale's oil is used in so
many homes just as the fish caught by the fisherman is consumed
in so many houses. Ishmael declares "But, though the world
scouts at us whale hunters, yet does it unwittingly pay us the
profoundest homage, yea; yea, in all-abounding adoration! for
almost all the tapers, lamps, and candles that burn round the
globe, burn, as before so many shines, to our glory." And he
concludes "Here I prospectively ascribe all the honor and the glory
to whaling; for a whaleship was my Yale college and my Harvard."
If the words of Palani, Santiago, and Ishmael are examined care-
fully they may be said to speak of the different attitudes to life
that the East has in comparison with the West. Whatever their
approach, the fishermen have one thing in common. They feel
wedded to the sea; they are its sons and to it they must turn for
their livelihood. Maurya laments at her youngest son Bartely
leaving her "Isn't it a hard and cruel man won't hear a word from
an old woman and she holding him from the sea”. And Cathleen reminds her: “It’s the life of a young man to be going on the sea.” Bartley’s five brothers and his father have all been drowned but Bartley will go out into the sea. Similarly with Palani. The entire fishersfolk may abandon him but he refuses to give in. Taking a deep breath he states firmly: “I am a fisherman. And I shall continue to live a fisherman. I shall die a fisherman.” So he embarks on his plan of fishing dangerously alone on a small boat. And when Palani baits a really big shark, ‘a shark so huge that no fisherman had ever baited on his coast,’ he shouts out in triumph and is in hot pursuit of the Prize catch (like Santiago) in the very face of death. It is now not merely just another fish, but a challenge—a challenge which every vile fisherman will accept come what may, for danger is sport. The sea is now relentless and one sees its force. It sweeps everything before it. What strikes the reader, be it in novel, poetry or drama is its immensity with man, a petty abjectless thing, in comparison. When destruction is complete in Moby Dick and the Pequod has sunk, the final picture is of the sea. “.........and the great shroud of the sea rolled on as it rolled five thousand years ago.” It is the same in Chemmeen. After the tragedy of the night, “The next morning day dawned on the calm sea as if nothing had happened.” Yet for those on its shore everything has happened. Palani, Karathamma and Pareckutti are all gone. Those left behind are Chemban Kunju and Panchami. Maurya’s words have a distinct echoing here. “In the big world the old people do be leaving things after them for their sons and children, but in this place it is the youngmen do be leaving things behind for them that do be old.”

Chemmeen is a novel that deals with the fishermen of Kerala who live a life that is distinctively their own and yet it is a life which has something in common with the rest of the fishersfolk the world over and humanity in general. Nirikunnam may be a tiny fishing village, but we see a world in it. The novelist has portrayed in artistic terms and with an interest that is profoundly serious, the lives of these fishermen: their dreams, their aspirations, their illusions, their hopes, their fears, their joys and their sorrows which bind them not only to each other, but binds together all humanity.
THE INDIAN NOVELIST IN ENGLISH
AS BEST-SELLER

Sujit Mukherjee.

The a-posteriori realization that he has written a best-selling novel does not, as far as we know, disconcert any novelist. But the prospect of writing one has been known to preoccupy novelists to the exclusion of other authorial concerns. No dependable formula of best-selling has yet emerged in Indo-Anglian fiction, nor are sales-figures readily available to prove that any particular work has turned out to a commercial success. But it is interesting to speculate upon such features of Indo-Anglish novel-writing which seem to aim at that eminently desirable (from the writer’s point of view) but generally condemned (from the readers’ point of view) prospect of best-selling.

The necessary preamble to selling well—namely, just getting into print—is a triumph over circumstance for Indo-Anglian writers that is not properly appreciated by unsophisticated readers. To get published abroad was for them, at one time, not only a matter of prestige, nor a matter of looking for extra-territorial readership, but simply the only available outlet. Indian publishers in English belong to such a long tradition of utilitarian publication—ranging from treatises and reports to textbooks and bazaar-notes—that trafficking with literature is an indulgence they have permitted themselves only recently. Even then a lot of Indo-Anglian writing, specially in fiction, gets published in India only after having appeared previously under a foreign imprint. R. K. Narayan’s work may today be closely associated with Indian Thought publications of Mysore or Mulk Raj Anand’s with Kutub-Popular of Bombay, but *The Bachelor of Arts* was first published by Eyre and Spottiswood and *Untouchable* by Wishart Books, both of London. ‘Made in England’ has been a time-honoured selling-device on the Indian market for other goods besides literature, and foreign approval has seldom failed to ensure native interest even of things made in India. The perfect paradigm of this aspect of modern Indian culture is Tagore’s English *Gitanjali* which was discovered
by the rest of India only after its discovery by the rest of the world.*

Not all Indo-Anglian writers aspire to get published in England or America with an eye on another Nobel Prize, nor is the superiority of the dollar or the pound over the naya rupee as legal tender the only concern of such writers. Instead of being a best-selling bid, foreign publication is often the Indo-Anglian novelist’s first stride into an uncertain future.

That the stride cannot be taken for the mere asking has been stated with remarkable and unexpected modesty by Nirad C. Chaudhuri in his *The Intellectual in India*: “Coming up against difficulties in the case of my two longer books, I often said to myself: ‘I thought that the most difficult task was the writing of the book, but now I see that placing it is an infinitely worse business.’ Nevertheless the writer should not give up trying: If even ten publishers reject his book, an eleventh might take it up.” (p. 75) More recently, Mulk Raj Anand has narrated his teething troubles in an article in *Indian Literature*: “In spite of the fact that I worked and worked and worked nearly five years on the novel and thought I had created a compact, short, symbolical work with a universal significance, it was turned down by nineteen English publishers, one after another.” (X: 3, 1967, 40). Both these depositions reveal—and there must be a great deal of unpublished evidence of the same problem—the peculiar predicament of the Indo-Anglian novelist who is in such a thumping minority that he despairs of attracting any Indian publishers’ notice, and yet has to face competition on a global scale when he approaches a foreign publishing house. In seeking a publisher in England or America, the Indo-Anglian novelist must compete not only with the substantial output of these two countries but also with aspiring novelists from all over the English-speaking Commonwealth. Whatever partiality or patronage the Indian writer may have enjoyed during the days of the British Raj is now being divided and scattered among West Indian novelists and East African novelists and Pakistani novelists without a thought to proportionate representation. Every time a V. S. Naipaul or a Chinua Achebe or a Zulfikar Ghose emerges, a budding R. K. Narayan or a ‘blooming’ Raja Rao has to wait his turn a little longer.

* Satyajit Ray’s first film, *Pather Panchali*, is another case in point of this shortcoming in Indian taste.
A further uncertainty attends the career of an Indo-Anglian novel even after it has got into print abroad, because it may have appeared at a time when the winds of book-reviewing may not be favourable. As much as in women’s clothes, there is a constantly changing vogue in literary fashions in the western world. A luckless Indo-Anglian novelist may appear at a time when Indian writers are not ‘in’ and even the kindly pat on the head which established review-columns like that of the London Times bestow upon an Indo-Anglian novel may not be available. Another not infrequent repercussion is the treatment sometimes meted out by Indian reviewers who are quick to brand Indo-Anglian novelists as some brand of traitor or mercenaries because they have sold their wares so far from home. Foreign publication, therefore, is no guarantee of automatic success in terms of selling profitably. As our latest Sahitya Akademi award winner Bhabani Bhattacharyya remarked at the P.E.N conference of 1959, “There is a curious belief in some of our literary circles that publishers abroad are all too anxious to have Indian novels on their lists. You simply have to do your book in English and the gates of heaven by way of large circulations and sumptuous royalties will be wide open before you. It is hard to understand how such an idea has gained prevalence unless it is ascribed to self-complacency.” (The Novel in Modern India, ed. Iqbal Bakhtiyar, 1964, pp. 43-44)

Those two outstanding works by R. K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand mentioned earlier illustrate another aspect of the early Indo-Anglian novelist’s struggles. Referring to those dark days when he failed to get Untouchable accepted for publication, Anand says: “I must confess that I felt suicidal, until a young English poet, Oswald Blakiston, took the book to a small publisher called Wishart Books Ltd., and brought the assurance that they would publish it if E. M. Forster would write a preface to protect the book against being called ‘dirty’ because it dealt with dung.” (op. cit.) Behind the bravado of the concluding part of that statement lurks the uneasy admission that Untouchable was accepted for publication because E. M. Forster wrote a preface for it. And this was in 1935, two years after Anand’s first novel, Coolie, had already been published in India. An identical situation seems to have developed in the case of R. K. Narayan whose first book, Swami and Friends, appeared unaudied in 1935 as an Indian publication, but his second novel, The Bachelor of Arts (1937), which was published
in England, carries an introduction by Graham Greene. It is
patent that in both cases the intervention of E. M. Forster and
Graham Greene had helped these two publishers to make up their
minds rather than provided additional reader bait. Indo-Anglian
novelists since then have not needed foreign aid in quite this form,
and those who came after have to thank Anand and Narayan for
making the publication of Indo-Anglian fiction a reasonable
undertaking for publishers. The habit, however, dies hard in
surban riddent India. E. M. Forster wrote a preface for Huthi
Singh’s Maura, Mrinalini Sarabhai’s This alone is True has a fore-
ward by Maurice Collis, and K. Nagarajan’s Chronicles of Kedaram,
an admirably self-supporting work, carries an introductory essay
by Hilton Brown. Those who have read Narayan’s non-fictional
work, My Dateless Diary (1960), from cover to cover may not have
noticed that on the inside backcover is reproduced a letter of
appreciation from Arthur Isemberg. Its coy position makes it
clear that the letter is not part of the blurb.

Next to being reviewed widely and well, the Indo-Anglian
novelist’s desire to be noticed has to be met—as in the case of
novelists in any language—in the market itself. Only the preli-
minary skirmish is over when he gets into print. The scene of
battle now shifts to book-store racks from where, jostled by novels
in English by non-Indians, the Indo-Anglian novel must announce
itself to the world. Some writers are fortunate in owning un-
mistakably Indian names—like Khushwant Singh or Raja Rao—
so that a potential purchaser who is already attuned to India has
no difficulty in recognising the genre. Some like Santha Rama
Rau and Kamala Markandeya continue to write in their maiden
indentities, perhaps because names like Santha Bowers or Kamala
Taylor would not conjure up images of intellectual Indian woman-
hood. These two writers, incidentally, enjoy a positively unfair
advantage over their male fellow practitioners when it is a matter
of having the author’s photograph on the back-cover. Both these
ladies are much better looking than female novelists have a right
to be—think of George Eliot and Gertrude Stein!—and their good
looks cannot be entirely ignored while assessing the appeal their

* Fifteen years and three novels later, Graham Greene again wrote an in-
troduction for Narayan’s The Financial Expert (1952) when it was published
by Methuen. It may be noted that this novel had an American edition in
1953, a German edition in 1955, a French as well as Dutch edition in 1958,
books have for the common reader. Names and faces apart, an Indo-Anglian novel often calls attention to itself merely by its title. Coolie or Purdah and Polygamy or The Gong of Shiva are epithets as redolent of India as are the more unabashed direction given in such titles as Twilight in Delhi or Flood Along the Ganges. Even the more artful indirection of calling a novel The Vermilion Boat or Cry, the Peacock or The Serpent and the Rope sharpens rather than diverts appetites already nourished on Indian matter. All these are perfectly respectable tricks of the trade which the Indo-Anglian novelist practises towards establishment of a genre which even now is lighting for a natural place amid other Indian writing.

Meanwhile, publication facilities are becoming more and more easily available to the Indo-Anglian writer. Already that familiar badge of commercial well-being namely, a paperback reprint following the original hardcover edition—is worn by a number of works. It gives these works a kind of double exposure, without blurring either image. In some cases, both editions have been published abroad—for example, Narayan’s The Bachelor of Arts (Eyre and Spottiswood hardcover of 1937) became available as a ‘News of the World’ Pocket Book title in 1951. In more recent instances of both editions being published abroad, the time-lapse between the hardcover and the paper back reincarnation has been narrowed—Kamala Markandeya’s A Silence of Desire (Putnam, 1960) and Narayan’s The Man eater of Malgudi (Wm. Heinemann, 1962) both reappeared as Four Square paper backs within five years. With the growth of paper back publishing in India itself, it is very common for Indo-Anglian foreign hardcovers to re-enter orbit as Indian paperback. Jaico Books lead the field in this regard with a number of well-known titles like Bhabani Bhattacharya’s He who Rides a Tiger (original, Angus and Robertson), Kamala Markandeya’s Some inner Fury (original, Putnam), and Balachandra Rajan’s Too Long in the West (original, Wm. Heinemann).* The proprietors of Hind Pocket Books (Delhi) have lately entered this competition with their Orient Paperbacks series which includes Bhattacharaya’s A Goddess Named Gold; their production values have so far been superior to any other Indian paperback while their prices are lower, hence they may provide the Indo-Anglian novelist at long last with a wide market in his own land.

* Jaico have at least one Indo-Anglian original on their list, Sally Athogias’s Gold in the Dust.
Neither place of publication nor name of preface writer is, in the final analysis, a durable guarantee of the contents of an Indo-Anglian novel. From the covers and from what is on or near them, we must move to what is between the covers in our search for that magic substance which captures a reading market. Insofar as the Indo-Anglian novelist is conscious of his peculiar position (namely, that unlike other Indian novelists, he writes in a language which belongs to no particular geographical or emotional region in India, which is familiar to not more than five per cent of his countrymen at a generous estimate, and which has a potential readership of incalculable magnitude outside the country) and conceives of his own function and purposes accordingly, his creative work falls broadly into three categories with regard to the raw material he treats. To the first and the largest category belong those writers who have taken it upon themselves to document Indian life of the recent past in varying degrees of coverage and intensity. It may be the timeless Indian of Sudhin Ghose’s *The Vermilion Boat* or K. Nagarajan’s *Chronicles of Kedaram* or Kamala Markandeya’s *Nectar in a Sieve*; or it may be the transitional India of Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* or Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* or Anand’s *The Big Heart*; or it may be India in the grip of an important event, as in Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers!* or Khwaja Ahamed Abbas’s *Inquilab* or Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan*. It may seem unnecessary to observe that all these novelists write of Indian life—being Indians, what else could they do. But in all these novels there is an expository element which suggests that their authors expect to be regarded as windows upon India, if not as reliable ‘sources’ of understanding India. This does not mean that these novelists have only a foreign reader in mind when they set out to portray India. The Mysore small town of Narayan is as unfamiliar to a Bengali as Bhattacharya’s Bengal village is to a Punjabi or Anand’s mofussil is to a Mysorean. No less than the prospective readers across the black waters, the presence of a pan-Indian readership is both a challenge as well as a lure to the Indo-Anglian novelist, perpetually threatening the poise of his creative vision, tempting him intermittently to draw posters when he should be etching in minute detail.

A second category may be formed of such novels as Kamala Markandeya’s *Some inner Fury*, Balachandra Rajan’s *The Dark Dancer*, Santha Rama Rau’s *Remember the House*, Nayantara Sehgal’s...
A time to be Happy, and Raja Rao's The Serpent and the Rope.* Each of these works treats the theme of traditional India's encounter with Europe and westernization, a theme which seems to come most naturally to the Indo-Anglian writer since he is by definition a product of two cultures. In a general way all educated Indians in modern India belong simultaneously to east and west but the bi-cultural element becomes a most handy instrument of sensibility when the Indian writer chooses to write in English. The dichotomies of Indian life are as easy to depict as they are to observe when presented in terms of east-versus-west, hence the tendency of the novels cited above to uphold the divided inner being as the central experience of Indian life. It is not surprising that most of these novels employ first-person narrative technique and are autobiographical in character. Most of their authors are not only 'westernized' Indians but also live abroad. To them and to the wider world through them—the experience of being Indian is to exist in a permanent state of dilemma. It makes for a proposition easy to respond to and sympathize with.

The third major category includes those writers who seize upon certain common place notions and sensational aspects of Indian life, and enlarge them to the point of being representative of the whole—maladroit metaphors which function as synoptic synecdoches. The themes of such novels vary considerably—native princes and palace intrigues; sadhus, gurus and occult beliefs; joint family life and the caste system; sexual intemperance and communal riots; corruption in public affairs and hypocrisy at home; Anglophil natives and Indophile foreigners—and all of them contain enough truth not to be summarily rejected as fiction writers' fables. But all of them belong to a familiar syndrome about India, the essential ingredients of which have changed very little since Rudyard Kipling first rendered India into colours, movements and characters which became integral part of English fiction. One has only to read such works as Kamala Markandeya's Possession or Khushwant Singh's I shall Not Hear the Nightingale or Anand's The Private Life of an Indian Prince to realise how faithfully these novels have adhered to an unmistakable 'image' of India, and have fulfilled rather than formulated expectations of what a novel about India should contain.

* It must be a coincidence that these novels appeared so close to each other in time between 1957 and 1961.
None of the novelists mentioned above, it must be noted, have consistently exemplified these reflections upon the best-selling possibilities of Indo-Anglian fiction. The only novelist whose work so far seems to respond most often to these possibilities is Manohar Malgonkar, whose four novels between 1960 and 1964 have made him perhaps the most widely read recent Indo-Anglian novelist at home and abroad. His first novel, *Distant Drum*, was put out by Asia Publishing House, the three following were all published from England, by Hamish Hamilton; the fourth has reappeared in paperback.

He seems to have adapted his surname slightly to permit easier pronunciation anywhere in the world Malgonkar instead of, possibly, Mulgaonkar or Malegaonkar. A verse from the Gita, a line from the Ramayana, have been used as epigraphs in two novels, while the title of his latest, *A Bend in the Ganges*, clearly announces its pedigree. None of his novels has a preface written by some British novelist. But like his first hero, Lt. Col. Kiran Garud—"Whenever Kuan was confronted with a tricky situation, he always tried to think out what a British CO would have done in his place" (*Distant Drum*, p. 52)—Malgonkar has steadfastly maintained British norms in measuring Indian life. During the Second World War Malgonkar held a commission in the army and rose to the rank of Lieutenant-Colonel himself; his first novel must be substantially based on his first-hand experience of the Indian Army which, in its transfer from British control to Indian control, offers an appropriate version of the east-west debate so insistent in Indo-Anglian fiction.

His second novel, *Combat of Shadows*, remains his least known work and it betrays some uncertainty regarding the author's notion of himself as an Indo-Anglian writer. It is a remarkable virtuoso performance in as such as it must be the only Indo-Anglian novel written as if no Indian wrote it.* Only those familiar with Malgonkar's fiction will be able to look back and recognize the characters as belonging to Malgonkar's gallery--firmly drawn stereo-types who are so easy to identify that they present no obstruction to the headlong pace of story-telling which Malgonkar has developed. There is not the slightest concession made anywhere in the novel to the origin of the novelist. There is even a glossary of

* Some of D. F. Karaka's work attempts this disguise.
Indian words at the end, and some of the meanings given in the glossary (Santhal, a tribe in Assam; Shrimati, respectable woman; Zidd, feud) recall the cheerful inaccuracies perpetrated by British authors when they wrote fact or fiction about India.

It is in his last two novels that Malgonkar has found his vocation. Maharajas, tiger-shoots, sex, tribal rites, politics, rioting, war—all these are splashed richly across the pages of The Princess and A Bend in the Ganges to make these his two most popular works. The Princess has already been translated into Marathi,* one wonders if those Anand brothers, Chetan and Dev, have any plans to translate it further on to the silver screen. It has been a short and successful journey from the halting honesty of Distant Drum to the confident carpentry of A Bend in the Ganges, and I look forward with interest to the next Malgonkar novel. Three years have passed since the last and a new one must be on the anvil right now.

As I see it, the Indo-Anglian novel began as a reaction to and protest against Meadows Taylor and Rudyard Kipling. It grew up in the shade, literal as well as metaphorical, of Edward Morgan Forster. Since then it has found its feet and strode off in many directions on its own. But the novels of Manohar Malgonkar stand apart in having found their model in the work of that other retired army colonel, John Masters.

* The translator has retained the title transcribed in Marathi (or Devanagari) perhaps out of deference to the fame of the original title.
INDIAN POETRY IN ENGLISH—
THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

M Rama Rao

The term “nineteenth century” in the title of this paper is, like many other labels of the kind in literary history and criticism, rather elastic. For, whereas, on the one hand, the beginnings of Indian writing (and of poetry) in English did not coincide with the commencement of the nineteenth century, on the other, some of the characteristics of the poetry of that century and some of the poets themselves continued into the present century for a decade or two.

Indian poetry in English may be said to have started with the works of Kashiprasad Ghose — if we exclude Derozio, who was only half Indian, his father having been a European. Ghose was perhaps the first Indian to bring out a volume of poems in English. But the poetry contained in his “ponderous volume of two hundred pages”, The Shore and Other Poems (1830), is largely derivative and imitative. He seems to have played the sedulous ape to some of the English poets of the eighteenth century and to Sir Walter Scott, as is evidenced by his conventional descriptions of nature and his tendency to indulge in moralising. The chief poem which gives the name to the book reveals in its very title the influence of Scott’s Lay of the Last Minstrel, and neither its subject nor its form is original. The volume contains a few poems on Indian festivals written after the model of Sir William Jones’s poems. Kashiprasad’s poetry is interesting more for historical reasons than for intrinsic merit. There is nothing distinctive in his writing, as the following stanza from his address to Goddess Saraswathi shows:

“Tis thou who bidst the infant mind,
Its growing thoughts display,
Which lay within it undefined
In regular array.”

Equally poor is The Moon in September, with its description of a cloud wrapping the moon “like beauty in a shroud”, and the same moon issuing forth in the very next line with “brightest
sheen” and tipping “with silver all the woodlands green”. In *The Boatmen's Song to Ganga*, the poet makes the unique discovery that the moon

“will soon grace
The hall of the stars with her light-shedding face;
The wandering planets her palace will throng,
And seraphs will waken their music and song.”

And this is how the boatmen take leave of the river which supports their lives:

“Gold river! gold river! our brief course is done,
And safe in the city our home we have won;
And now as the bright sun who drops from our view,
So Ganga, we bid thee a cheerful adieu! ”

It must be admitted that Kashiprasad has succeeded in attuning his ear to the English rhythm and manages his metres quite well for so early a poet. But there is nothing more in his poetry. We have only to compare his *Boatmen's Song to Ganga* with Sarojini Naidu's *Coromandel Fishers* to understand how far Indian poetry in English travelled away from its unpromising beginnings within a century.

Kashiprasad received much encouragement from Richardson who was for some time Principal of Hindu College, Calcutt, and edited the *Calcutta Literary Gazette* and *The Bengal Annual*, the latter of which was “a delightful anthology of prose and verse” in which some of Kashiprasad's poems were included. Another early nineteenth century poet who owed much to Richardson was Rajnarain Dutt who in 1841 brought out his lengthy poem in heroic couplets, *Osmyn, an Arabian Tale*. This again clearly bears the stamp of a literary fashion that had by then become rather obsolete in England, as these lines illustrate:

“What thundering sound upon the midnight wind
Comes louder and yet louder from behind?
The caverned echoes wake; the vaults of stone
Relieve the clattering tramp in varied tone!
Who comes so late and armed, at headlong speed
With sable turban, cloak and barbed steed!”

Lines like these remind us of similar performances by Leigh Hunt and Campbell.
The poems of these two pioneer writers of Indian poetry in English indicate with what admirable diligence they had studied the metrical forms of English poetry so much in advance of the days of University education in the country. They heralded the appearance of a poet much greater than either of them, Michael Madhusudan Dutt. Madhusudan's reputation now rests on his celebrated epic, *Meghnadbadha*, written in Bengali, which, ironically enough, he had denounced in his early days as a "barbarous language". Because of this contempt for his mother-tongue, Madhusudan started his career as a man of letters writing in English. His one famous poem in English, *The Captive Ladie*, appeared in 1849 in Madras where he had been to make a living by teaching and editorial work. The theme of the poem is the love story of Prithviraj and Samyukta and its after-effects, famous in Indian history and legend. The influence of the English romantics, especially of Coleridge, Byron and Scott, is writ large on the subject, the language, and the style of the poem, as could be seen in the much-anthologised lines describing Mahamad of Ghazni's "murderous intent towards the besieged Hindus of Delhi":

"A thousand lamps all gaily shine
Along the wide extended line,
And loud the laugh and proud the boast
Swells from that fierce, unnumbered host;
And wild the prayer ascends on high —
Dark vengeance thine impatient cry —
'Oh! for a glimpse of Day's fair brow
To crush yon city towering now,
To make each cafir-bosom feel
The unerring blade of Moslem steel!"

It could be seen by those familiar with English Romantic poetry that these lines smack of the spirit of the eastern tales of Byron. But the poem has some finer and softer touches too, as when Prithviraj, knowing that his city is doomed to perish, and, wanting to put an end to himself and escape the possible indignity to which he is sure to be subjected when captured by the enemy, suggests to his queen that she should fly and save herself. Her reply has an appealing force:

"Oh! never, never will this heart
Be sever'd, love, to beat apart!"
For in the forest's green retreat,
Where leafy branches twine and meet,
Though wildly round dread Agni roars,
Like angry surge by rock-girt shores,
The soft gazelle of liquid eye
Leaves not her mate alone to die!"

The reader cannot but notice the fluency of this verse as well as its metrical competence.

Madhusudan Dutt was the author of another collection of verses, *Visions of the Past*, which presents the old theme of the Primeval Innocence, the Temptation and the Fall of Man in the form of Visions. There are here and there in these poems too some fine strokes of picturesque description, as when he deals with Satan who is represented by means of suggestive images, such as

"A form of awe — and yet it seemed
A sepulchre of beauty,"

and

"... a giant tree in mighty war
With storm on whirlwind car and fierce arrays
Blasted and crushed -- of all its pride bereft."

and, again,

"A phantom of departed splendour lone."

Madhusudan also wrote some occasional poems, a good example of which is the sonnet, *To a Star During A Cloudy Night* in which "the solitary tenant of the sky" is addressed by him as "sweet emblem of Hope's lingering ray". But, except for these purple patches, Madhusudan's writing in English does not possess any extraordinarily compelling merit, and it was good that he switched over to his mother-tongue.

There seems to have been something poetic about the very name "Dutt" during the second half of the nineteenth century, for many persons of that name were associated directly or indirectly with the worship of the Muse. A famous volume of about two hundred poems by members of a single family was published in 1870 under the title *The Dutt Family Album*, the poets whose contributions it contained being Govinda Chandra Dutt, Hara Chandra Dutt, Girish Dutt and Omesh Chandra Dutt — the sons and nephews of Rasamoy Dutt. The second of these had already brought out a volume of verse *Fugitive Pieces* in 1851 and his second collection
of poems *Lotus Leaves* appeared a year after the publication of *The Dutt Family Album*. The authors of the *Album* apologetically state in the Preface:

"The writers of the following pages are aware that bad poetry is intolerable, and that mediocre poetry deserves perhaps even a harsher epithet. There is a glut of both in the market. But they venture on publication, not because they think their verses good, but in the hope that their book will be regarded, in some respects, as a curiosity. They are foreigners, natives of India, of different ages, and in different walks of life, yet of one family, in whom the ties of blood-relationship have been drawn closer by the holy bond of Christian brotherhood. As foreigners educated out of England, they solicit the indulgence of British critics to poems which on these grounds alone may, it is hoped, have some title to their attention."

But, despite this modest disclaimer of merit on the part of the authors themselves, it is a volume which it is neither easy nor proper to ignore. It is remarkable for the mastery and variety of metre, the range of subject-matter, and the quality of style represented by the poems in it. Out of a total of 197 poems, the contributions of only two, Govinda Chandra and Omesh Chandra run up to 66 and 73 respectively. History and legend, nature and society, the religion which the authors had given up and the religion which they had adopted—all these provide subjects for these poems, which deserve attention partly for whatever intrinsic merit they have and partly for curiosity's sake, and also because of the exemplification of the commendable—sometimes astonishing—metrical skill in a foreign medium which they contain, though we cannot but take note of the imitative element which makes itself felt in many of the compositions. The following lines by Govinda Chandra Dutt, for instance, remind us of the manner of some of the 17th century English poets:

"When from the dewsprent rose the blustering wind
Steals leaf by leaf away,
Sighs the sad flower to leave no trace behind,
No record of its day?"
“When the fair colours in the rainbow laid,
    Dissolve in heaven’s own hue,
Weep they to find their glories blend and fade
    Into the pristine blue?

“When the stars on stars before the rising sun
    Sink down and disappear,
Mourn any that its brief career is run.
    And leaves no vestige here?

“Why then should man alone indulge in grief,
    Or ever wish to give
A frail memorial of his sojourn
    To those who later live?”

Similarly, we hear the clear echoes of the second stanza of Keats’s *Ode to Autumn* in the following lines of Govinda Chandra’s *Farewell to Romance*:

“Who hath not seen thee in his chamber still
    At dead of night? For me, I’ve seen thee oft,
When through the lattice came the moonlight chill,
    With incense from the garden borne aloft.”

These lines are the first four of a stanza of twelve, the rhyme scheme of which is ababcdedefdef. This illustrates the capacity of Govinda Chandra Dutt to use stanza-forms other than that of the quatrain with the good old abab rhymes. One more example may be given to show how he can handle complicated stanza structures. Dealing with Wordsworth’s home, he writes:

“Hail, ye Rydalian laurels that have grown
    Untended by the Poet’s calm abode,
And in the footpaths that he often trod
Wrapt in deep thought, at evening time, alone.
No Delphic wreath he wanted, when he found
Nature unveiled in all her loveliness;
    But these wild leaves and wilder flowers that bless
Our common earth he prayed for, and she bound
His brows therewith; and see, they never fade,
A crown of amaranth by her own hands made.”

The rhyme scheme in this ten-lined stanza is ababcddee. It is obvious that the addition of one more quatrain just before the
last two lines would make it a good sonnet in the management of which form too Govinda Chandra had a deft hand, as the one on his children, illustrates:

"Most loving is my eldest, and I love him most,
    Almost a man in seeming, yet a child,
And may it long be thus! I would not boast;
    But of his age who taller? le.s defiled?
My next, the beauty of our home, is meek,
    Not so deep-loving haply, but less wild
Than her dear brother — brow and blushing cheek
    Her nature show serene, and pure and mild
As evening's early star. And, last of all,
    Puny and elf-like, with dishevelled tresses,
Self-willed and shy, ne'er heeding that I call,
    Intent to pay her tenderest addresses
To bird or cat, — but most intelligent,
    This is the family which to me is lent."

This sonnet puts us in mind of the fact that apart from his own contribution to Indo-Anglian poetry, Govinda Chandra Dutt has a claim in our respect as the father of Toru Dutt. Before taking leave of his poetry, let me quote two stanzas from his poem, The Hindu Convert to his Wife, which he addressed to Mrs. Dutt, agonised by her demeanour of apparent hostility to him on his having become a Christian. They show the sincerity and fervour and the intimately personal note which he could put into his poetry when he was deeply stirred:

"Nay, part not so — one moment stay,
    Repel me not with scorn.
Like others, wilt thou turn away,
    And leave me quite forlorn?
Wilt thou too join the scoffing crowd,
    The cold, the heartless, and the proud,
Who curse the hallowed morn
When daring idols to disown,
I knelt before the Saviour's throne?

"It was not thus, in former hours,
    We parted or we met;
It was not thus, when love's young flowers
    With hope and joy were wet."
That kindly cheek, averted eye,
That heaving breast and stifled sigh,
Attest thy feelings yet.
It was not thus reserved and cold,
Like strangers, that we met of old."

Of the other contributors to *The Dutt Family Album*, Girish Chandra deserves mention. In 1887 appeared a collection of his poems which had already seen the light of print in *The Dutt Family Album*. But the majority of its contents were new. Girish Chandra’s speciality is the Sonnet. Of the 165 poems in *Cherry Blossoms*, seventy are sonnets and give expression to the author’s experience at home and abroad. Among the best of these sonnets is the one on Gibraltar, written strictly in accordance with the Petrarchian model:

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"That flag that here floats proudly in the air,
The silent warders on the ramparts white,
The guns that hide in sheltered nooks from sight,
Or from the seaward spar, their chosen lair,
Gaze on the waters with a steadfast stare;
The rock-cut embasures ablaze at night,
The mole, the ships, the keep’s commanding height,
All speak of stern resolve and watchful care.
For leagued in arms should Europe rise once more,
To question on this steep the lion’s reign,
Swift must the deadly hail of battles pour,
As on the day when baffled France and Spain
Beheld their vaunted ships in flames ashore,
Or drifting helpless on the stormy main."
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Girish Chandra wrote a good number of lively poems too with historical and legendary tales as their subject-matter, a good example of which is provided by his poem on the Rajput hero, Samarsi:

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"Samarsi the bold is the pride of his clan,
But he owns not an acre in broad Rajasthan;
Samarsi the bold is the hope of the true,
But his sporran is empty, his henchmen are few;
For the Moors o’er the Jumna in triumph have come
And Samarsi the bold is an exile from home."
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These lines bear unmistakable evidence of the influence of Scott's ballads, the words "sporran" and "henchmen" in the fourth line quoted above being Scottish and "Moor" too clearly un-Indian.

Besides Girish Chandra, a couple of other writers chose themes from Indian history for their poems. But most of these do not possess any markedly Indian quality and there is not much to choose between them and the poems on Indian subjects written by foreigners like Sir William Jones and Edwin Arnold. But occasionally the ardour of the poet is roused by a theme about which he feels genuinely, as for example, in the lines on the Ganges by Soshi Chandra Dutt:

"Canst thou forget thy glorious past,
When mighty as a god,
With hands and heart unfettered yet,
And eyes with slavish tears unwet,
Each sable warrior trod
Thy sacred shore; before the blast
Of Moslem conquest hurried by,
Ere yet the Mogul spear was nigh?

"Over crumbled thrones thy waters glidet,
Through scenes of blood and woe;
And crown and kingdom, might and sway,
The victor's and the poet's bay
Ignobly sleep below.
Sole remnant of our ancient pride,
Thy waves survive the wreck of time
And wanton free as in their prime."

A comparison of these lines with Kashiprasad Ghose's Boatmen's Song to the Ganga shows the baldness of the latter.

But poems like Soshi Chandra Dutt's lines on the Ganges are rare. On the whole, it could be said that the poetry of these early and midnineteenth century writers is lacking in conception and imagery which is characteristically Indian and could be called arresting for that reason. The ideas as well as the diction and versification have in most cases been copied from English writers. This may have been due to the natural lack of confidence on the part of these authors in regard to their abilities in harnessing an alien medium to their requirements. But it would be unfair to
cry them down wholesale, for occasionally there are encouraging indications of good poetic achievement. Their command of metres compels recognition and is amazing since many of them had never lived in the midst of an English-speaking community. Perhaps a word of praise is due to the thoroughness with which English was being taught in those days by devoted Englishmen who manned the newly-founded educational institutions and the equal thoroughness with which it was being learnt by pupils who did not consider acquisition of mastery of accent and pronunciation as the linguist's funeral.

It is a different story when we come to Govinda Chandra's daughter, Toru Dutt, that "frail exotic blossom of song", who, Edmund Gosse felt confident, would have a page dedicated to her in the history of English literature. H.A.L. Fisher is even more emphatic when he declares that "when every deduction has been made for unessential blemishes this child of the green valley of the Ganges has by sheer force of native genius earned for herself the right to be enrolled in the great fellowship of English poets." Having been taken to England at the age of thirteen for her education, Toru had the advantage of personal contact with many English men and women and of catching the accent of the language from people whose mother-tongue it was. This explains to a great extent her fluency and grace in that medium, though even she, as Fisher himself points out, is not always beyond reproach on points of diction, and "her ear, indeed, sometimes betrays her." But otherwise her verse is remarkably "well-knit, vigorous and of a pleasing variety", and more than all, it is not merely imitative. Toru was equally proficient in English and French and yet refrained from taking her themes and techniques from the poets in those languages. Oh the contrary-she chose to write on Hindu legends and mythological lore and her heroes and heroines were Prahlad and Dhrupa, Lakshman and Eklavya and Savithri and Sita. She is the first Indo-English writer of importance who attempted to interpret the heart of India and to create the genuine Indian atmosphere in her writings, and this she did in spite of her family having become Christian and in spite of her having stayed long in England and France.

Toru started her career as a poet with translations from French poetry — "A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields (1875), as she beautifully named her collection, translations in which "the romantic fervour,
the feeling for freedom and melancholy, even the magic are caught and communicated in substantial measure". (Dr. K. R. S. Iyengar) She is equally at ease whether she is rendering Victor Hugo’s *Les Châtiments* or Eugène Manuel’s *A History of the Soul*, and equally successful in transplanting specimens of French poetry on to English soil. There is something peculiarly interesting in this Indian girl interpreting French poetry to English readers. In a sonnet of her own which she included in *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields*, she politely remarks about her gleanings from French poetry,

“But better than myself no man can know
How tarnished have become their tender hues
Even in the gathering and how dimmed their glow!”

Against this confession must be placed the unhesitating compliment of Edmund Gosse that “if modern French literature were entirely lost, it might not be found impossible to reconstruct a great number of these poems from this Indian version.”

But it is for her original poems on Indian themes that Toru is better known and has a conspicuous place in the gallery of Indian Writers of English Poetry. While most of the poems of *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (1882) deal with themes taken from Indian mythology, a few give expression to her personal moods and feelings. In the poems dealing with old legends she retells the old stories in the light of her own understanding and imaginative visualisation of what she has heard and read, as is evidenced by her treatment of the themes of Lakshman, Savithri and Prahlad — poems which show that in spite of the estrangement of her family from orthodox Hindu society she had imbibed the essence of Hindu religion and culture, partly by heritage and partly by training. While it is unnecessary to quote at length from a writer so well-known and read as Toru, reference has to be made to the little poem, *Sita*, in which “three happy children in a darkened room” sit listening to the old story of Sita’s sufferings told them by their mother, and a characteristically Indian setting is created by the poetess in these lines:

“It is an old, old story, and the lay
Which has evoked sad Sita from the past
Is by a mother sung . . . ‘Tis hused at last
And melts the picture from their sight away,
Yet shall they dream of it until the day!
When shall those children by their mother's side
Gather, ah me! as erst at eventide,"

The last words of this poem at once remind us of the moving nostalgic reference to the companions of her childhood which Toru makes in the third stanza of her Our Casuarina Tree, in which she recaptures the past in a striking manner. After a wonderfully picturesque and concrete description of the casuarina tree at Bangmaroo underneath which she had played with fellow-children, she exclaims:

"But not because of its magnificence
   Dear is the casuarina to my soul:
   Beneath it we have played, though years may roll,
   O sweet companions, loved with love intense,
   For your sakes shall the tree be ever dear!
   Blent with your images, it shall arise
   In memory, till the hot tears blind mine eyes!"

The deep personal feeling which these lines express exemplifies Toru's command of the lyrical as well as of the narrative medium of expression. The two poems from which these extracts have been quoted also serve to illustrate her "almost faultless technical skill", whether the metre be blank verse or intricate stanza forms.

Toru's elder sister, Aru, was no less a frail blossom of song than the younger one. She died, as Toru did, . . . just as she stepped beyond her teens and had by then given her relations and friends some indication of her innate poetic sensibilities and abilities by means of a few translations from the French, like Toru herself. One of them, later included in A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields, was Morning Serenade, rendered from a poem of Victor Hugo:

"Still barred thy doors! the far east glows,
   The morning wind blows fresh and free.
Should not the hour that wakes the rose
   Awaken thee?

"All look for thee, Love, Light, and Song,
   Light in the sky deep red above,
   Song, in the lark of pinions strong,
   And in my heart true Love.
   o   o   o
"No longer sleep,
    Oh! listen now!
I wait and weep,
    But where art thou?"

It was this poem which Edmund Gosse's eye alighted upon with "surprise and almost rapture" when he opened the copy of *A Sheaf Cleened in French Fields*, put into his hands by Prof. Minto, and about which he writes enthusiastically; "When poetry is as good as this, it does not much matter whether Rouveyre prints it upon Whatman paper, or whether it steals to light in blurred type from some press in Bhovanipore."

Toru Dutt's cousin, Romesh Chander Dutt, has earned a place for himself by his translations of the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* and of some samples of Sanskrit poetry culled from other sources. He represents the movement for the revival of interest in Indian civilisation and culture, as his famous histories on the subject reveal. In his translations his purpose, as he explains in the Preface to his *Lays of Ancient India*, was to present to western readers representative selections from Indian poetical lore which would appraise them of the glories of our ancient literature. These translations lack the personal touch possessed by Toru's re-tellings of Indian legends, but they are good. They are efficient renderings of their themes into English and reveal mastery of metre and language which is not always to be found in translations. As examples of this mention may be made of the legends of Satyakāma, Gārgi, Maitreyi, Uma, and Balāki in the second section of *Lays of Ancient India*. Equally satisfactory as translations are the passages from Kalidasa's *Kumāra Sambhava* and Bhāravi's *Kirātārjuneya*. The former opens with the easy-flowing stanza:

"Long through sultry Summer evenings
    Did her mighty penance last,
Long through Rains and through the Autumn,
    In the Dews and Winter's blast."

(*The Penance of Uma*)

Here is a picture of Autumn from Bhāravi:

"From charms the rainy time displays,
    To autumn's fresher charms we fly!
What though no white cranes deck the sky,
    Nor are the skies with rainbows graced;"
The autumn sky hath beauty rare,
And beauty unadorned is best!
What though the god of rains gone,
Nor lightnings deck the clouds now pale;
Like sorrowing wives the autumn clouds
In paler grace are lovely still!

What golden crops,—rich in their beauty,
With their load of ears bent low!
They bend as if to feel the fragrance
Of the flowers that spring below!"

(Autumn Fields)

That Romesh Chander can render descriptive passages excellently is again revealed in many parts of his translations of the epics, condensed versions of which he put into English using the metre of Tennyson’s Locksley Hall for the purpose. The lengthy rhymed couplets are not always helpful in the narration of epic action, and we often feel that the poet’s liberty and the epics’ majesty suffer as a result of his having to submit himself to this limitation. The abridgment too cannot escape criticism, as it gives the reader an insufficient idea of the real dimensions of the originals, this being the impression he gets especially in the case of the Mahābhārata. But, on the other hand, it should be acknowledged that Romesh Chander’s translations of the epics are among the best to which a novitiate could go. These translations have also been enriched with critical and explanatory comments by the translator which appear both within the body of each book and at the end.

Like Toru Dutt Manmohan Ghose (1867-1924), elder brother of Sri Aurobindo, not only went to England at a very early age but stayed there for nearly eighteen years, with the result that “English became almost a mother-tongue to him, and the companionship of kindred souls fanned the poetic fire in him.” These kindred souls were Laurence Binyon, Stephen Phillips and Arthur Cripps. Manmohan began writing poetry during his sojourn in England and a small volume of poems by the four friends was published in 1890 under the name Primavera. It was well received by reviewers like Addington Symonds and Oscar Wilde, the latter of whom described Manmohan as the “Young Indian of brilliant
scholarship and high literary attainment who gives some culture to Christ Church” and felt sure that he “ought some day to make a name” in English literature. Later on, in 1898, Manmohan brought out Love Songs and Elegies, the only collection of his poems published during his life-time, the second collection of some of his writings being published, two years after his death, in 1926 with an appreciative introduction by Laurence Binyon.

Manmohan sang in his early poetry of Love and Nature and the joy which came of them. The first stanza of Myvanwy in the Woods runs thus:

What presence clear,
Like a beam has entered here?
What loved footsteps that the trees
Freshest their soliloquies,
    Birds break into lays,
All fair nature’s heart runs wild
To remember her sweet child?
    In the wood Myvanwy strays,"

and this is the last stanza:

“Ah! no gift of heath to city,
It was love led you, love and pity
    To my sad heart,
Child, your rapture to impart.
    Me, fast-bound like wintry earth,
Your intoxicating mirth
Loosed, and rained delightful showers,
    Showed where their song birds borrow,—
All the joy of April flowers.”

Another poem is entirely devoted to April in which he invites the “delicious, young, sunny maiden” thus:

“With fresh flowers laden
After dead winter long
Thrill us with sweet bird-song.
After dry March’s draught,
Blow from thy rainy month!”
Hasten to kiss us
With the fresh daffodil
Through and through golden!

But he was, as his daughter, Lotika, reminds us, no “recluse shunning the company of fellow man.” This is clear from his London, written after his return from the country:

“Farewell, sweetest country, out of my heart, you roses,
Wayside roses, nodding, the slow traveller to keep.
Too long have I drowsed alone in the meadows deep.
Too long alone endured the silence Nature espouses.
Oh, the rush, the rapture of life! throngs, lights, houses,
This is London. I wake as a sentinel from sleep.”

In the third stanza of this poem he makes the revealing confession:

“And a sense of vast sympathy my heart almost crazes,
The warmth of kindred hearts in thousands beating
with mine.”

It was this “warmth of kindred hearts beating with” his that Manmohan missed when he returned to India and became “an exile in his own motherland”, after having lived “too long in the west”. In a letter to Lawrence Biyon written soon after his return to India and appointment as Professor of English in the Bengal Educational Service, he says: “It is like April in England Green things are indeed wonderful here, but brown things (that is, man!) are absurdly out of sympathy with me.” In another letter he refers to “the magic sound of Europe!” which made him a stranger in the land of his birth. In Myvanwy, written when he was still in England, he had already said with reference to India,

“Lost is that country, and all-but forgotten.”

And, when he came back, he longed for the English environment which he had left behind him. And this, in spite of a specific caution administered by his father, Dr. K. D. Ghosh, who, in the course of a sonnet addressed to him on the eve of his departure for England, said,

“Thy freedom I esteem though thy excess
I check off. Go but still as ours remain.
Be not like apes who change their manners, dress,
And language, of their trip becoming vain,
They England for their home do shameless call
And reckon motherland and tongue as gall."

To quote Binyon again, "England had given him much, and to
the best she had a singularly receptive spirit had responded with
delight. . . . was her last gift to be the cruel gift of estrangement
from his people?" But we notice that in the last stanza of Myvanwy
in the Woods which I quoted a little while ago and which was
written when he was in England, he speaks of his "sad heart" to
which Myvanwy imparted her rapture. Evidently he was at
home neither in England nor in India, and the result of this lack
of harmony between him and his surroundings explains the tone
of melancholy which appears in his poetry — melancholy which
was intensified by the death of his wife, and made him cry out,

"Where art thou, my old sweet Quiet,
Where, O where?"

(The Old Sweet Quiet)

There is, however, an undercurrent of "spiritual awareness" in
Manmohan's writings which is Indian though his themes are not
specifically so. But, whatever the themes and the way he treats
them, there is no gainsaying the fact that he adorns what he touches
and that his technical skill is of a high order. "No Indian", says
Binyon, "had ever before used our tongue with so poetic a touch."

There is one more poet that should be mentioned before this
survey of nineteenth century poetry is brought to a close. This
was Swami Vivekananda. To many people it may be a surprise
to find poetry associated with Vivekananda, known as he is as
saint, patriot, and humanist. But, as the editor of his poems,
Swami Premnanda, remarks, "A saint is sometimes an artist as
much. Belonging as his thoughts do to a higher plane, the aesthetic
sense of a saint and seer is automatically developed, and that
sense may be expressed through various channels. So we find
that some of the saints were great musicians, some were great poets
and so on. Mirabai, Kabir, Dadu, Tulsidas, and Nanak are no
less known for the expression of their devout thoughts in exquisite
poetry than for their sainthood. Shankaracharya wrote some
hymns which belong to the treasure-house of Sanskrit literature." Vivekananda became famous for his lectures and spoke on the
problems of life, philosophy and religion with all the authority of an academic scholar. "Here is a man more learned than all our learned Professors put together," said Prof. J. H. Wright of Harvard. But he was also a genuine poet and used the vehicle of verse, both in English and Bengali, to give expression to his meditative experiences. The burden of his speeches and writings is the message of dynamic Advaitism. In his poetry this message gets a force which even the living voice of the speaker lacked, celebrated though it was for its eloquence and potency. Poems like The Song of the Free may be adduced as typical specimens of the soul-stirring and uplifting clarion call of Vivekananda:

"Let eyes grow dim and heart grow faint
And friendship fail and love betray,
Let fate its hundred horrors send
And clothed darkness block the way --

"All nature wear one angry frown
To crush you out - still now, my soul,
You are Divine March on and on,
Nor right nor left, but to the goal."

The Song of the Sannyasin rouses the timorous who lack confidence in themselves:

"Strike off they fetters! Bonds that bind thee down,
Of shining gold, or darker, baser ore;
Love, hate, — good, bad, —and all the duel throng.
Know, slave, caressed or whipped, not free,
For fetters though of gold, are not less strong to bind,
Then off with them, Sannyasi bold! say —

'Om Tat Sat, Om'!"

Equally powerful and moving are The Living God, in which he reprimands people "who neglect the living God and His infinite reflections with which the world is full" and "run after imaginary shadows that lead alone to fights and quarrels" and A Song I sing to Thee with its mystic's cry:

"Thy servant and I through birth after birth . . .
But only one desire is left in me, —
An intimacy with Thee, mutual!

Take me, O Lord! across to Thee;
Let no desire's dividing line present."
But Vivekananda can also give vivid descriptions and show himself an impressive word-painter, as in *Kali the Mother* and *Let Shyama Dance There* (translated from the Bengali), the former of which begins thus:

"The stars are blotted out.  
The clouds are covering clouds,  
It is darkness vibrant, sonant,  
In the roaring, whirling wind  
Are the souls of million lunatics  
Just loose from the prison-house, —  
Wrenching trees by the roots,  
Sweeping all from the path.  
The sea has joined the fray,  
And swirls up mountain-waves,  
To reach the pitchy sky.  
The flash of lurid light  
Reveals on every side  
A thousand, thousand shades  
Of Death begrimed and black —  
Scattering plagues and sorrows,  
Dancing mad with joy.  
Come, Mother, Come!"

A few steps further and we come to the grand raptures, the cascade-like outpourings of Sri Aurobindo with whom want of time forbids me to deal in spite of a part of his poetry having been written before the close of the nineteenth century.

Nineteenth century Indo-English poetry thus represents a preparatory stage. Starting with stark imitations of English poets, it gradually Indianises itself to the extent of using Indian themes and presenting them to the English-speaking world. But there is as yet not much in it to inspire the zealous attention of devotees of poetry, Indian or English. This weakness may have been due to the difficulty of making a foreign language receptive to Indian feelings, the problem of the adjustment of the medium of expression and the matter to be expressed. The possibility of such adjustment is demonstrated by the works of Toru and Manmohan and Romesh Chander to a certain extent. But even they lack depth and height, and E. J. Thompson’s unrestrained tribute to the “greatness of soul” and the “greatness of mind” of
Toru Dutt sounds almost ridiculous. Vivekananda’s poetry is very meagre and limited in its range. Indian poetry in English which would be representative of the varied aspects of the life and culture of the nation awaited at the turn of the century the coming of poets who not only had a command of the techniques of expression but were Indians to the core and in whom the springs of poesy ran full and wide-embracing.


CONTEMPORARY INDIAN VERSE
IN ENGLISH

-- H. H. Anniah Gowda.

My subject is thin in content but rich in variety. A study of Contemporary Indian Verse in English involves, I am afraid, a brief discussion of comparative literature as a ‘necessary angel,’ to borrow an expression from Wallace Stevens. It is in this area that some of our writers have achieved distinction in the eyes of the world. India is situated at a junction between two cultures, Asian and European, and very favourably poised with its linguistic and ethnic roots, it stands behind Greece as parent of much thought still flourishing in the West. It is no exaggeration to say that the poetry written in different languages including English, and the Indian aesthetic culture provide a natural bridge between the Orient and the Occident. This may well apply to the various other modes of writing in this country. That the Indian can use the Englishman’s language with power and effect is a commonplace observation. About a decade ago THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT pointed out that the “centre of gravity of English literature has moved out while we are busy consolidating; a brand new English literature will develop and flourish in Johannesburg, or Sidney or Vancour or Madras”. A distinguished body of writing in English worthy of critical study exists in India. I have spent some time on the study of this Indo-Anglian writing both as a student and as an editor of a periodical which gives prominence to creative writing; and I have tried to form conclusions during my teaching and research, and endeavoured to cultivate the results and gather them with a certain amount of discretion. I can possibly without hesitation say:

"Tis not the hasty product of a day
But the well-ripened fruit of wise delay.

This branch of contemporary English writing is in an efflorescent condition. I use the word ‘contemporary’ in preference to ‘modern’. The word ‘modern’ has often been used to describe some values or tastes which are dominant in the critical world at the present moment. The term is synonymous with literary
movements in Europe, England and America. The term ‘contemporary’ has no such prejudice. It is one of the ironies of history that imperialism did not and could not there interfere with the growth of intellect and the play of imagination. The writers in dependent India were fully aware of the intellectual movements in the West and sought consciously to imitate them. Michael Madhusudan Dutt sent a sonnet on Dante to Victor Emmanuel, the Italian King, commemorating the author of DIVINE COMEDY. The King was delighted that the noble poetry of the Italian genius found an echo on the shores of the Ganges. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu who are still perhaps the best of those who have attempted this form of literature were greatly benefited by their contact with the West.

Beginning with these writers who have ventured Indian themes in English drapery, we have a host of poets who can be read with pleasure and profit. Most of the poets of the thirties, forties, fifties and the sixties take in the ‘revolutions’ of the poetry written in Europe and elsewhere. They have responded whole-heartedly to the models from abroad. Their work becomes meaningful within a total view of poetry. In 1917 T. S. Eliot wrote thus:

“No poet, no artist of any art, has his complete meaning alone. His significance, his appreciation is the appreciation of his relation to the dead poets and artists. You cannot value him alone; you must set him for contrast and comparison, among the dead. I mean this as a principle of aesthetic, not merely historical criticism.”

It is not the role that the creative writers of Europe, England, Canada, America, Africa and very recently Australia play that is important but their technique. The roles of these poets differ as they operate in separate milieu. Broadly speaking the people of these countries inherit European background for their art. But thanks to the historic accident of the European invasion of India, the Indian poets can draw not only on their own traditions, on their own past, the past of the epics, the Vedas and the Upanishads, but on the European past also. Toru Dutt and Sarojini Naidu, who had too much of the European background, started writing like Keats or Shelley. But Edmund Gosse’s advice to Sarojini
Naidu was timely. He suggested to her to write "no more about robins and skylarks in a landscape of our midland countries, with the village bells somewhere in the distance, calling the parishioners to Church, but to describe the flowers, the fruits, the trees, to set her poems firmly among the mountains, the gardens, the temples, to introduce to us the vivid population of her own voluptuous and unfamiliar province; in other words to be a genuine poet of the Deccan, not a clever machine-made imitation of the English classics."

The early part of the century produced a generation which grew up in English intercourse and on English ideas and were benefited by sheer exposure. It was a generation that spoke English better and took a keen interest in the literature and culture of their motherland. At the head of this School, apart from Sarojini Naidu, stands G. K. Chettur, an Oxford Graduate. Chettur must have known and felt the vogue for T. S. Eliot and others during his Oxford days. He has published a few volumes of poetry: THE SHADOW OF GOD (1934), THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE, GUMATARAYA, THE TEMPLE TANK, and SOUNDS AND IMAGES (1922). In a letter of appreciation to Chettur in 1922, James H. Cousins wrote: "Your poetry added much to the studies of the Poetry Appreciation Class in the College of the City of New York in the year just closed. . . . We discussed certain of the poems from the point of view of content, quality and technique. Term and examination essays show that they made the deepest impression on many of the students. Their high significance and sensitiveness made much American poetry feel as 'sounding brass'." Cousins was not exaggerating but stating the plain truth. Chettur excelled as a writer of lyrics, particularly sonnets and his style is without a false move. His Muse is predominantly meditative, and, as the TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT put it, "It is perhaps for this reason that he is at his best in his sonnets, which are as pleasing for their melodious gravity as for their many delicate felicities of phrase and imagery." He had a commendable grasp of English idiom and the nuances of words. In his day he was looked upon as one of the best writers of English in India.

THE SHADOW OF GOD is a sonnet-sequel, full of echoes of Milton, Shakespeare, the Romantics and the last of the Romantics. Death is the motif of many of these sonnets, and the manner
of its handling reminds us sometimes of John Donne. There is in all these sonnets a strain of melancholy, recalling Keats to our minds. "Light is the Shadow of God", "Light of the Palace", "So This Is Death", "Alas How Soon Doth Life Make Common Cause", "The Shadow of God is Beauty" are some of the sonnets in the sequence which illustrate Chettur's mastery of the sonnet form. THE TRIUMPH OF LOVE is a collection of love lyrics, a sonnet-sequence again on the theme of love. One of the finest in the sequence is Sonnet XXIII. The Shadow of Keats, at least, lays heavily:

Who that has lived, and loved, and seen fair things,
And striven with darkness beating into day,
With spears dream-pointed, and climbed with wings
Above the tumult of the lesser way,
Shall speak slightly of God?
They that have known this brief infinity
Are one with the immortals. They have trod
The floors of Heaven in Heavenly company,
Intoxicate with blessed harmonies.
So we, the proud inheritors of love,
Grown God-loke in immortal ecstasies,
Dream God-wise, of a day that love shall prove
Magnificently, in the after years,
Beyond the mortal touch of time or tears.

SOUNDS AND IMAGES is dedicated to W. B. Yeats whose influence on Chettur's poetry is unmistakable. The collection opens with ASPIRATION, a sonnet in the Petrarchan style. Poems like "Enchanted", "A Thought", "Desire", "A Rose by the River's Brink" are in conventional four-line stanzas. Their intensely lyrical character apart, these poems reveal a sensitive response to natural beauty, and remind us of some of Wordsworth's nature poems. Love, of course, is a recurring theme in Chettur, and many poems in this collection are built on this theme. One of the most moving poems is "Lament on the Death of a Little Child". The poem begins thus:

Crushed in the fingers of Fate,
Fair Flower! —
What thrills had not life for thee
What passion, what ecstasy,
But for this hour! ---

The border-line between poetry and music is indistinguishably thin; one has only to read Chettur's "The Nagawaram" to realise how well a gifted poet can recapture and reproduce the spirit of music. GUMATARAYA is another collection of sonnets. The title is derived from the opening sonnet addressed to Gumataraya the Jain statue, 45 ft. high, at Karkala, in South Kanara. Only those who have stood in the presence of this mighty monolith can appreciate fully the beauty of this piece. The sonnet concludes thus:

We yield the burden of our soul's despair
And lifting eyes to thee, our hearts are peace.

What impresses us most is the author's mastery of the sonnet form, be it the Petrarchan or the Shakespearean type. "Little Mercies", "On A Child Sleeping", "Rabindranath Tagore", "Death", and "Beauty" are sonnets of which any poet might be proud. THE TEMPLE TANK contains some of Chettur's best lyrics including the somewhat whimsical "World's End." All the poems spring from the quiet haunt of serene and inward contemplation. This is true specially of poems like "The Temple Tank", "The Sentinels", "Peacocks" and "Beauty".

Chettur ranks high among Indo-Anglian poets. He shunned the robbins and Skylarks of an English landscape and wrote about the birds and trees and streams and rivers and tanks he knew. His nature poems breathe the very spirit of the land of his birth. He employs English verse forms and metres with masterly skill, and lavishes upon his themes a copious flood of colour and sound. The medium is used to evoke an atmosphere. A highly emotional temperament and a mind keenly alive to the appeal of earthly beauty as also to its transience lend a distinctive quality to his poetry. He is never verbose but uses words as an expression of and not a substitute for thought.

Joseph Furtado, a Goan poet, whose collection SELECTED POEMS came out in 1967, wrote contemporaneously, with Chettur on Nature, Love, Humour and Religion. Although these are the dominant motifs, emotions like envy, resignation are not excluded. Edmund Gosse, reviewing for THE TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT one of his early collections, has noticed the freshness and
ecstatic naivety of his feeling for life. In a little imaginary conversation between himself and a bird in “The Corn Field” he describes himself thus:

An untaught poet
Of trees and birds
Whom no man knoweth
And, wanting words.
But dreams and sings
Of simple things.

He has written ballads—“The Cobra-Woman”, “The Italian Architect”, and “The Pilgrim”. His ballads have charm and simplicity though they may not be as excellent as those in Percy’s RELIQUES. Some of his lines from “Christ with the Cross” are remarkable:

I see the whole scene — just as ‘twas-
And there is mother to aid the child
If memory fail him or be dim;
The Man of Sorrows with the Cross,
The sorrowing painter at a loss
To please his wild and pitiless child,
Who yet shall live to bear his cross
And there be none to pity him.

He was an experimenter with the Anglo-Goan patios: his vocabulary is rich and his verses are pretty regular. He may be classed with Chettur as having laid the foundation for creative activity in tongues other than their own. While Joseph Furtado is regular and austere, R. de L. Furtado is completely under the influence of T. S. Eliot in THE CENTRE (1955) but soon comes into his own in THE OLEANDEERS AND OTHER POEMS. His themes are varied—“Mahabharata”, “Locomotives”, and “City Lights”. The poems reveal remarkable talent and the gift to use English for evocative purposes.

A writer who comes from an English-speaking family, and whose father worked for a British newspaper and is now Editor of an English newspaper, trained at Oxford, has come under the influence of many English poets — Spender, Auden, Muir and Enright. He is an Indian expatriate who is uprooted from his native culture and soaked in the London Soho romanticism. “Song” that begins his GONE AWAY: AND INDIAN JOURNAL, has:
I sowed my wild oats
Before I was twenty,
Drunkards and turncoats
I knew in plenty,
Most friends betrayed me,
Each new affair
Further delayed me.
I did not care.

The attitude is typical of an expatriate, who started writing about "Figures in the Landscape", dancers and pebbles, and about Giant Buddhas in regular verse. His principal works are A BEGINNING (1957), POEMS (1960), and the latest with an all inclusive title, POEMS 1955 - 1965. A BEGINNING, which contains lyrics mostly, was awarded the Hawthornden Prize. On the whole we can say, borrowing a couple of lines from "Landscape Painter" —

The style was charming and remote,
Some taste, a manner and a little wit.

In the next collection POEMS, Dom Moraces displays the gift of facility, mellifluous smoothness, and a mood of perception along with his liking for regular metres. The title JOHN NOBODY is derived from Percy's RELIQUES. It contains a number of regular sonnets but none dealing with Indian themes. Instead one reads about "The Chipped Bar", "Lonely Drinkers", "Santa Claus", "Underground" and "Advertisements with Girls in Brassiers". It looks as if the poet echo sthe uncomplimentary reference to Milton in certain quarters. In "Angel" he says:

And where the angel shelters from that rain
He will find Milton in a library,
His blind eyes looking fixedly at pain;
Under the fiery wing; at one touch he
Is purged of blindness and of poetry.

The first poem, one of the dedicatory sonnets, has about it a slightly uncomfortable modern tone-uncomfortable because it is neither in the world of the twentieth century disillusionment nor yet still more in the comfortable romantic world of the mid-Victorian poets. These are lines which are close enough to Eliot:
That day, bored with myself, I leant upon
The chipped bar, chinking thoughts together like
A late drunk two pence short of busfare home
Who knows that taxis will not take a cheque.
The dreary weeks ahead too far to walk,
To slump into a doorway and stay dumb
As lone as I was let, seemed all my luck,
It seemed my luck would always stay the same.

There is a kind of pessimistic newness about this; and it is true
of some of the early poems where one feels that the poet is not
speaking his proper voice. But finally his personality emerges,
despite the many easy, expansive effects and uncertainty of voice
as a result of his dual background. He is very human, fond of
his mother and his country; nostalgia is seen in the little poem
"John Nobody". He grows homesick for an Indian day. This
nostalgia is taken up in the newest group of poems beginning
with "Letter to My Mother"—the title derived from one of the
poems of the Russian Poet Sergei Esenin. It is a very moving
poem, as moving as any poem by a gifted poet on that most be-
loved person—the mother. This poem is poignant, as poignant
as Cowper's and conveys the sense of heart-broken separation
from one's origins:

I am tidying my life
In this cold tidy country.
I am filling a small shell
With my books. If you should find me crying
As often when I was a child
You will know I have reason to,
I am ashamed of myself
Since I was ashamed of
You . . . .

And again:

Your eyes are like mine.
When I last locked in them
I saw my whole country,
A defeated dream
Hiding itself in prayers,
A population of corpses . . .
You know I not return.
Forgive me my trespasses.

There is no Byronic or eclectic style, but an obsession with the loss of identity as is seen in “The Children” and “Midsummer”. There is in these poems a certain intensity of physical awareness as also awareness of “one step nearer into death”. These motifs suggest the emotional commitment of an expatriate trying to discover his own right medium in a foreign culture.

While one congratulates Dom Moraes on his racy use of English, he is not the best example of Indian writing in English. He is the product of an unusual cultural confluence. But this tendency to find the right medium is seen in A. K. Ramanujan, who more than Dome Moraes, is trying to discover himself through the Western modes. He came to write original poems after a good deal of translation. THE STRIDERS (1966) contain poems of one whose roots are embedded in his culture but writing under the spell of another. Although under the influence of William Carlos Williams in his use of imagistic pieces, he is sometimes bitter and even funny:

Not branchless as the fear tree,
It has naked roots and secret twigs.
Not geometric as the parabolas
Of hope, it has loose ends
With a knot at the top
That’s me.

His poems are a little tautly constructed. The little poems like the “Snakes” and “Breaded Fish” contain easy common place profundities drawn from the life around him. His knowledge of Indian life finds expression in “A River” or “A Leaky Tap After a Sister’s Wedding”, “On Memory”, and other poems. His imagery is native and clear. He lets himself reveal in poignant self-exploration, often one of expatriate nostalgia.

There is no set pattern; the models are diverse and for a time Eliot was the rage. Homage was paid to Eliot by P. Lal who has considerable poetic output, original and translation, and transcreation to his credit, and who is also responsible for publishing and encouraging many a creative talent in this country:

Noble father of the new style,
May your syllables of sensuous intelligence
Guide σου faring forward: "Go, be a lump to my yourself,  
Work out your salvation with diligence.  
Not farewell,  
But fare forward, voyagers".

With F. R. Stanley, a teacher of literature at Thambaram, and  
K. Raghavendra Rao who teaches Politics in Karnatak and R.  
Parthasarathy, who made a great hit by appearing in THE TIMES  
LITERARY SUPPLEMENT, Indian poetry in English is con-  
stantly changing and evolving like any other poetry. One has to  
affirm what Ezra Pound once said, "When the application of  
work to things goes rotten, i.e. it becomes slushy and inexact, or  
excessive and bloated, the whole machinery of social and indivi-

dual thought and order goes to pot. This is a lesson of history, and a  
lesson not yet half-learned." This principle seems to be borne  
out by our poets, pure and simple Indians like Nissim Ezekiel and  
Kamal Das. Ezekiel has four collections to his credit: A TIME TO  
CHANGE (1951), SIXTY POEMS (1953) THE THIRD (1959)  
and THE UNFINISHED MAN (1959) besides a number of  
poems in the periodicals. He has appeared in AN ANTHOLOGY  
OF COMMONWEALTH edited by Margaret O’Donnell.  

His poems on the whole are regular; sometimes he follows the  
rhyme-scheme of six lines as in “Urban”, and he writes sonnets.  
One of his finest sonnets is entitled “Evening Sonnet” published  
in THE LITERARY HALF-YEARLY. He can weave modern  
cliche and stylish prose into a rhyme. I quote the sestet:  

I give it up. There’s nothing to be done.  
The light is gone, and friends no longer come.  
Among the twenty there is only one  
Who writes; He hopes to stay away from home.  
I see the lovers from their walks return.  
And turn away but feel my eyelids burn.

This kind of reflection is seen in too many of Ezekiel’s poems. His  
titles are exquisitely precise: “A Morning Walk”, “Urban”,  
“Marriage”, “Event” and so on. His collections are vigorously  
pruned; they are five-finger exercises on various themes, embodying  
the poet’s personal experience. I may be permitted to quote  
what I said of him about eight years ago: “Our reactions, hostile  
and favourable, may be summed up in the statement that Ezekiel’s  
handling of rhythm suggests not the song but the dance; he sings
not as a bird sings; he treads a learned measure, and sometimes
we can catch him counting his steps. But his images and language
belong to the realm of what Wordsworth called the language of
everyday."

While Ezekiel's poems are concrete and real, Kamala Das's
images, at least in "Composition" are exotic:

Gravel at my feet
remove your monkey-suits and dance
sing Erato, Erato, Erato,
Yet I shall be indifferent.

She is an Indian woman who writes of thoughts that generate in
a woman, one who had "replaced love with guilt" and discovered
"that both love and hate are involvements." She is a writer of
short-stories in Malayalam, and poetry in English: she is funny
and profound by turns:

The tragedy of life
Is not death but growth
the child growing into adult.
and growing out of needs,
discovering
that the old have black-rimmed nails
and scalps that emanate
a sweet mouldy smell.

Her notion of poetry is rooted in the simple, the dazlingly simple
language of

It will be allright if I join clubs
And flirt a little over the telephone.
It will be all right, it will be all right
I am the type that endures.

But her treatment of love elsewhere is serious and the style man-
nered.

Too early the autumn slights
Have come, too soon my lips
Have lost their hunger, too soon
The Singing birds have Left . . . .

She has brought out so far one collection: SUMMER IN CAL-
CUTTA. It contains fifty poems of uneven quality, but the images
are coherent — the sun, the summer, the dust and sleep find evocative expression as in

The streets outside are dark and moist
Like the limbs of sleeping girls.

There is a wide variety of metric experiments and thematic explorations based on her experience as in “The Wild Bougainvilla” and “To a Big Brother”. One is attracted by her sentimentality, muscular precision of phrasing and movement, unmindful of the unevenness of the total collection.

When Mokashi’s first collection THE CAPTIVE came out in 1965 he had a mixed reception. One reviewer wrote: “Mokashi may be a poet but he should write in Kannada not in English”. Another reviewer opined, “There is proof in this collection as a whole that out of this confusion poetry may emerge.” Undaunted by the hostile and lukewarm attitude Mokashi published a second volume THE PRETENDER (1967). Judging by the output THE PRETENDER is a triumph of his clean English style, hinted at by Herbert Read in his Introduction to THE CAPTIVE. The poet remembers him gratefully:

What Sir Herbert read in my verse
He read. What he freely said
Was what so noble a soul could have said
For better or worse.

For better, Mokashi has carried on self-analysis as a mode of self-improvement; he is humorous and witty, and writes about Percy Mason and Deepate Fernandes in a rather Eliotian style.

I wish I were Perry.
I would have left California, come over to Bombay,
Taken a small flat on Colaba causeway
Got married to Della, got two children,
One male, one female, and when family planning,
No contraceptives: only mental self-control.

There is however peculiar crispness in the handling of the language.

There are a number of single-volume writers—THE DANCER AND THE RING (1965) by M. P. Bhaskaran, LAND’S END (1963) by Adil Jussawala, POEMS (1965) by Gieve Patel who is
included in YOUNG COMMONWEALTH POETS (1965),
DASAVATHARA AND OTHER POEMS (1967) by R. Rabindra-
nath Menon, and WELCOME, THE MOONRISE (1966) by
Karan Singh, who has a vivid eye for things in nature, “the
haunting tune which wafts me to a garden of the sea.” Rabin-
dranath Menon uses poetry to adumbrate mythological themes
in strict rhythm and imagery, while Adil Jussawala is at his best
in “Post-Mortem”, “Catholic Mother” and “Card Cutting”.
R. Parthasarathy who was awarded the first Ulka Poetry Prize
for 1967 is a daring versifier. Of India he writes:

The Bull as a Metaphor
Observe, the peninsula has the face
Of a bull. Include the mountains
and you have she horns. The sea will do
For a row of bells or of marigolds.

There seems to be a kind of revolution, call it “poetic” if you
like, going on in the sphere of creative writing in India, and else-
where. Indians who endeavour to write participate in this revolu-
tion, often unaware of the changes that go on in the realm of poetry
in the West. The Indian writer has to break loose from the past
of English poetry, as also from the constricting coils of his own
language, it is not the language of the art he is practising. In
most cases the thought is Indian and the drapery English.

The situation, the predicament, the vantage point, call it what
you will, which led these daring souls to find a will which can
define the nature of their world. If I may not be accused of
using a cliche—Here one speaks of ‘alienation’ a situation which
demands the use of the language we learned at school, but the
medium is out of touch with the actual experience. Like immi-
grants in a foreign land, creative writers search for “Self” and
“Identity”. This literary search is no more meaningful to the
average Irish poet or the American than the English languages is to
the average Indian. In the case of the Irish and the American the
mode of ‘alienation’ is different but the effect is the same.

At the moment there are no dedicated writers of verse in English.
As in most countries, men of various avocations and those blessed
with inspiration have been indulging in the art. Most of them
have been, to use Eliot’s phrase, “toiling to weave a laboured web
of useless ingenuity”. Some of them are banal; others are inter-
esting. I suppose this area is comparable to most other parts of the world. Only recently a 29-year old Leningrad poet, Josif Brodsky, who had been exiled to the arctic regions for one solid year with the label ‘social parasite’ for writing political quatrains, was set free. He now writes only poems ending in June and moon. The judge who tried Brodsky expressed total inability to comprehend either the life he led or the poetry he wrote. How in the world, asked the judge, is anyone able to categorise this writing of poetry as something “socially useful?” And he wondered how a poet can show “visible means of support”. The poets have long been suspected, not only in Moscow but elsewhere. When the young Vivian Yudkin first showed one of her poems to her sister, the sister’s face turned blood-red, and she ran with the screech of an outraged parakeet to report to the elders, crying Revenge! As the poem dealt with the injustice heaped upon the talented by the untalented, Vivian was greeted by her cousins in unblank verse, such as

If a husband you would find,
Banish poems from your mind!

She was warned that she should master socially useful tasks such as dish-washing, cooking and mending. Manny Hubermaun, another poet of distinction, had to listen all day and all night to the phrase, “visible means of support”, hurled at him by his father and mother, whose sole heir he was. His parents did not stop at that: they hid his poems, confiscated his ruled note books, even denied him the Passover wine; but nothing availed. Manny turned a deaf and delicate ear to this pleading of his parents, who then suggested, “At least write stories, something people can understand. When he grew up he was described as Mad Manny the poet. One day the father happened to walk past one of his son’s recitations, and paused long enough to proclaim loudly that had his other son lived, he would have made a far better manure-spreader than this one. Some people in the crowd said, Hear, Hear. Luckily the poet’s life in India is far better.

The creative writer, especially the poet, should be convinced that he is immersed in what T. S. Eliot calls tradition: the historical sense which catches “not only the pastness of the past but its presence”, which compels a man to act “not merely with his own generation in his bones with a feeling that the whole of culture
and human aspiration has "a simultaneous existence". Is the Indian poet in English aware of this, when he rhymes in a foreign tongue?