

**THE EMERGENCE OF THE FAMILY SAGA
IN INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH**

A Study of Midnight's Children, Yatra, The Trotter-Nama
and The Memory of Elephants

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
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CERTIFICATE

Certified that this dissertation entitled THE EMERGENCE OF THE FAMILY SAGA IN INDIAN FICTION IN ENGLISH: A Study of *Midnight's Children*, *Yatra*, *The Trotter-Nama* and *The Memory of Elephants*, submitted by Ms. Chithra Arumugam, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of Master of Philology, is an original work and has not been submitted so far, in part or full, for any other degree or diploma of any University.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

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Finally, to my grandmother and sister; and to my beloved parents who made possible my passage to Delhi and who have invested the best of their time, energy and effort in my education, I dedicate this dissertation with deep love and affection.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Chithra Arumugam'. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke extending to the right.

(CHITHRA ARUMUGAM)

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In this dissertation an attempt will be made to look at four novels published in the nineteen-eighties, each of which traces the saga of a family. The novels are Salman Rushdie's Midnight's Children (1980), Nina Sibal's Yatra (1987), I. Allan Sealy's The Trotter-Nama (1988) and Boman Desai's The Memory of Elephants (1988). Each novel revolves round the personal, familial, cultural, historical and political concerns of a specific well-defined community that forms a strand in the rich cultural fabric of India -- Muslim, Sikh, Anglo-Indian and Parsi respectively. The emergence of four novels with somewhat similar concerns within a span of a decade raises certain issues: a newer awareness of identity and nationality, a re-reading of India's history and its correlation with myth making, and the importance of narration in the consolidation of a culture.

The Oxford English Dictionary describes the family saga as "a novel or series of novels recounting the history of a family through several generations."¹ In a way, the great Indian family saga is The Mahabharata which focuses on genealogy, succession and battles over property rights. Every age has had its own forms of sagas including the typical ninth and tenth century Icelandic *segin sagas*

(meaning a tale told) such as the famous Egil's Saga, and modern ones like John Galsworthy's The Forsyte Saga (1906-21) and A Modern Comedy (1929).

In late twentieth century there are the popular best-sellers like Mario Puzo's The Godfather series (1969), Colleen McCullough's The Thorn Birds (1977) and Jeffrey Archer's Kane and Abel (1979) and The Prodigal Daughter (1982), which play upon familiar forms to incorporate contemporary material. By its very format the family saga is a tight narrative structure -- that of a genealogically traced family network around and into which the plot is weaved. Besides, the history of the family -- diachronically and synchronically spread out -- suggests concerns relating to roots, displacement and self-definition.

Although Indians have been writing fiction in English for at least half a century, family sagas have hardly ever been attempted before. The reason for their absence until the eighties might be a legitimate area of inquiry. The early generation of Indian English writers had an implicit nationalistic agenda and they projected an image that was Indian in a way that the internal differences were smoothed over. Malgudi became a microcosm of India; Kanthapura -- the paradigmatic Indian village; and Bakha was the symbolic victim figure of the Indian caste system.

The middle generation -- those who came into prominence in the sixties, like Anita Desai and Arun Joshi -- moved away from this concern with history and sociology into subjective and private arenas to explore individual psyches. This is a broad and therefore inevitably simplistic generalization, but it sets the context for us to understand the change that took place in the eighties. In the post-modernist trend that was initiated in Indian writing in English by Salman Rushdie, the earlier binary opposition between the private and the public gets obliterated; the individual and the collectivity get inextricably linked, and history occupies centre stage to unravel new meanings in the lives of nations, groups, communities, families and individuals.

In this sense the family saga is a very apt form to encapsulate a multitude of meanings. It has a realistic dimension also, because in India families are the most important organizational units in society -- the joint or extended family mirroring the hierarchy, the power structure as well as the protective features of the community at large.

Today, in cities and towns, due to the effect of urbanization, specialization of jobs and migration in search of employment, joint families are giving way to nuclear families. Even so, kinship alliances are maintained over

long distances and are manifested at festival/wedding/birth/death get-togethers. Hence any harking back to roots requires a response channelled through the family framework. The family saga framework also allows an enormous spanning of events and cultural characterisations both down the centuries (diachronically) and over a wide canvas at a given point in time (synchronically), and thereby becomes a convenient strategy to grapple with the history and geography of our vast subcontinent.

✓ Each of the four novels in this study revolves around a minority culture that forms part of India's larger mosaic. Here, majority and minority may be defined in the context of India's demographic composition. The majority, in terms of sheer numbers, are the Hindus who make up 82.64% of the population, according to the 1981 census report.² Their culture forms the majority culture as it is the most widespread and the most influential. However, Hindu majority culture has no uniformity. It has numerous variations based on caste, region, urban-rural factors. Besides, the Hindus are composed of various linguistic groups, and in many cases language and not religion is the major determining factor in identity formation.

Hinduism, at best, can be defined as a way of life rather than as a theological system. Given the numerical

preponderance of the Hindus, all other existing faiths and communities within India are described as 'minority' since together they make up a mere 16.93% of India's population.³ Of these, Muslims form 11.35% i.e. 75,512,439 individuals, which is more than the total Muslim population of Pakistan; Anglo-Indians form a very small part of the 2.43% Christians;⁴ Sikhs form 1.96% of the population and Parsis or Zoroastrians have a total strength of 71,630 individuals⁵ all over the country.

Acculturation (i.e. the process of contact between cultures resulting in the modification of the existing cultures) has, however, blurred distinctions between one community and another, especially where they are contiguous. Further, the emergence of some religious groups from the Hindu social fabric make the ties more complex. An example of this is Sikhism which developed as an amalgamation of the best of different religious thinking, and was strongly flavoured by Hindu customs, ceremonies and festivals. The Sikhs encouraged inter-marriages with Hindus while in Punjab Hindu families often brought up their first son as a Sikh. Even their Gurus have had a tradition of upholding the Hindu cause, as did Guru Tegh Bahadur, who was executed in 1675 A.D. for protecting the Hindus' right to wear their caste-marks and sacred threads. Only recently since the 1920s and more so after independence have some Sikhs tried to deliber-

ately distinguish themselves from the larger majority. Such a move has been accounted for by social historians. Khushwant Singh points out that what kept the Sikhs and Hindus together in undivided Punjab was their shared culture, language (Punjabi) and their common source of livelihood (farming). After the 1947 partition of India, most Punjabis (Hindus and Sikhs) who occupied East Punjab were those who had migrated from West Punjab. Tension between the communities was palpable only after the 1951 census in which the Punjabi Hindus witnessing the rise of the Akalis and fearing another eviction, were persuaded to disown Punjabi and instead allow Hindi to be falsely recorded as their native tongue. To Sikhs, this Hindu betrayal prognosticated worse betrayals in the future. Their political unit, the Akalis, were unable to assuage Hindu misgivings about their personal safety and livelihood, for assuaging Hindu fears meant the loss of Sikh votebanks. Lay Sikhs tended to see these overtures as being meant to appease Hindus at their own cost. Sikh protests, therefore, took the following forms: they emphasised the individuality of their community by wearing distinguishing external symbols; demanded a Punjabi suba (state); strengthened their political movement by invoking religion; demanded autonomy through the Anandpur Sahib Resolution and demanded recognition of their minority status in India.

\ The Anglo-Indian community are another result of the acculturation process. They symbolise more than any other community in India, the angst of belonging neither to the white nor to the brown race exclusively. Originating as the offsprings of British and Indian parents, they stayed outside the social circles of either community. In the nineteenth century the word Anglo-Indian often meant the British in India. Even today 'Anglo-Indian fiction' refers to the novels written by British authors about India. But the word also has an ethnic connotation in terms of India. Numerically very small, the Anglo-Indians are among the very few groups in India who claim English as their mother tongue. There has been a depletion in their number after Independence because of a tendency among the younger generation to migrate.

The Parsis were initially a refugee community who fled from the Arab invasion of Persia in seventh century A.D. and chose to settle on Indian shores. They have gained visibility in the subcontinent though their industry and economic vision. Concentrated in areas of Gujarat and Bombay, they are the smallest, most well-knit and most well-to-do community in India.

It is not easy to talk of Muslims as a minority in India in the same way because Muslim culture is inextricably mixed in the other cultures of the subcontinent as evidenced

in architecture, art, music, food and clothing. The relationship with the dominant Hindu culture has been symbiotic on the one hand, and fraught with tension on the other.

Today India is a rich mosaic of all these cultures operated upon by centripetal as well as centrifugal forces. While at the level of cultural practice syncretism is common, political and economic pressures have been encouraging dissonances. Friction between communities prompts a reaffirmation and an articulation of the identity, status, history and contributions of one's community within India. The spanning of centuries and the accommodation of different kinds of historical experiences necessary in this project are perhaps most advantageously set out in a family saga which not only gives continuity to collective community experience but also provides flexibility for an elaborate exploration of various issues.

Another concern that has to be dealt with here is the question of language and its capacity to capture a culture which does not express itself in that language. Writing in English could and still does raise doubts about the author's ability to authenticate the Indian experience and to communicate the flavours of Indian languages through an alien creative medium. Using English as a medium can be seen as a denial of local identity. The onus is on the

author to show himself free of the "my tongue in English chains"⁶ syndrome; to prove his 'Indianness' despite and through his medium of writing.

The novelist in India, writing in an Indian language does not face this crisis of identity nor are his loyalties rendered suspect. His readership is defined and naturally limited to the literate users of his language; his thematic/methodological experiments are anchored by the participatory immediacy of the linguistic medium; his work, realigning the literary tradition preceding him, is an extension of a legitimate historicized body of literary output. Besides, there is a homogeneity informing the receptors of his work in that literary tradition.

Unlike the regional language novelist, the Indian novelist writing in English faces serious problems in defining his audience. In addition, he is theorized into being a representative of the 'third world'. As the four novels this study takes up also face this danger of being facilely compartmentalised as 'third world' novels without the intricacies of their position being taken up, it is necessary at this point to define the position of the reader, the writer, the critic and the novel in relation to 'third worldism'. The irony of the third world text is that it seeks to undercut its colonial political origins while using the colonizer's medium of expression. As Aijaz Ahmad

points out, most third-world texts that the Western metropolis understands, appropriates and canonizes are written in European languages -- Portuguese, Spanish, French and English or are translated into these languages.⁷ In the Indian context, the medium used when it is English, matters on three counts. Firstly, the text in English is a commercial product trying to sell India abroad. Thus it can be loaded with Indian terms and exotica which are explained for the foreign reader's benefit. Besides, some of the novels are first published outside India, which in itself stands as a badge of recognition for the novel and the novelist. Of the four novels studied in this dissertation, Midnight's Children was first published in the U.K., Yatra in London by the Women's Press, The Trotter-Nama in the U.S. by Alfred A. Knopf; and The Memory of Elephants in London by Andre Deutsch. Secondly, when English is used as the medium of expression, the communication circle includes only the urban middle class user and the urban elites. It automatically implies that its readership group has been brought up with at least some exposure to the West. Thirdly, in order to counter denials of local identity due to the fact that the novelist was writing in English, the author resorted to loading his script with Indian terms and idioms. Thus, the Indian novelist writing in English in the first half of the twentieth-century bore the burden of proving his Indian

credentials in his writings. The initial engagement with novel writing therefore reflected a deliberate evocation of Indian locale (e.g. Malgudi); definite class, caste identities (e.g. the sweeper boy in Untouchable); recurrences of themes such as nationalism and oppression, the oppositions of East and West, the social dialectic of village and city and the impact of migration from rural to urban areas. Very often, these grew out of social situations unique to India, as for instance, the effects of caste system on social stratification.

However, there has now emerged an understanding that the value of literature should be judged neither by the yield it offers to the social historian nor by the patriotism that is expected to pervade a novel. Any danger of pervasive and debilitating English colonial cultural hegemony is being gradually exploded by the latest crop of writing -- both creative and critical. It can especially be denied in the irony that Midnight's Children and The Trotter-Nama exude. Most colonial generalizations are made to stand on their heads. The East/West divide as theme or as a feeder of animosity is absent. The West is in fact taken as yet another addition to the novelist's collection of cultural variables. In The Memory of Elephants the West is an intrusive locale. The East is quietly formulating the West as its 'Other'. In between, it is discovering the multifacet-

edness of its own self. The novels rigorously question the politics that informed the cultural and social discourse of the earlier years. Thus, hallowed concepts such as Gandhism, nationalism, patriotism, and 'Indianness', especially in the face of class, caste, religious and geographical discord, are problematised and critiqued.

The novelist of the 1980s concentrates upon the cultural and political formation of social being/identity. Collective integration, in an India that is heterogenous in more ways than recognised, is no longer so sacred as to go uninterrogated. In fact, the cause of integration is better served by highlighting the numerous mutable entities which hold together not because of political unity (i.e. the nation-state) but because of a centuries old geographical and civilizational ethos. Thus the driving myth of nationalism informing all creative projects due to its assumed power to impart social identity and cultural and political unity is exploded. It follows that literature cannot qualify as national merely by using a certain medium of expression. Rather, its 'national' credibility rests in its quality of being able to incorporate within its corpus the many voices and many tongues of the Indian experience.

The focus is now on specific identity, specific history, specific cultural antecedents, seen against the background of a large and plural social fabric. This impulse to

specificity is evident in the literary process of tracing roots and identity through 'minority' culture and through a single family line. In this process, the emphasis on English language and culture, and knowledge of its part in enhancing British hegemony over India, has now given place to a keenness to draw the best out of the medium and the culture contact experience it provides. The Indian writer of fiction in English no longer has to bank on locale or on linguistic transliterations to bring alive his experience of India. Instead, his deep-rooted concern with the dilemmas facing the country and the author's role as recreator and interrogator of those concerns, has liberated Indian fiction in English from its earlier burden of anxiety.

In a sense, this plurality is acknowledged in a miniscule way by the framework formed by the four novels studied here. The leading motif in each of the novels is the family saga. Here, 'family' refers not only to the biological family, but by extension, metaphorically and symbolically, to 'conceptual' families such as that of nation and community.

The narrative in each of the four novels contemplates the contemporary and is informed by the connective threads of history, politics and individual experience drawn from ancestral memory. The authenticator of such memory, in each

case, is the narrative 'I': Saleem - midnight's child; Krishna - of the changing skin; Eugene - the Chosen Trotter; and Homi, the memo-scan genius. However hyperbolic or epiphanic the events recalled, they are linked in a cause-effect chain to evoke and simultaneously draw upon a COLLECTIVE MEMORY. The reiterated emphasis upon memory assumes a solidity that deployment of narrative fantasy does not undercut. Thus, even the fantastic is traced to a happening that has been caught and recorded by memory. The chief quality of memory is that it recalls and patterns in retrospect; it is not identified with the capacity to fictionalise out of nothing. Acknowledging this, each novel settles into its logic of communication -- a tale reciter and a listener, or a narrator and a narratee. Usually a conventional narrative assumes a collective audience. However, three of the novels studied here pre-empt this by assuming a single narratee (Padma in Midnight's Children, the Cup-Bearer in The Trotter-Nama and Homi in The Memory of Elephants) and the fourth, Yatra, at times subsumes the narratee within the narrator.

The collective can be traced instead to a collective consciousness at the narrator level. Like the epic storytellers, the narrator taps sources from across time and space. All these sources are of personal relevance and are drawn by the narrator from the collective consciousness of

each family. Thus, Saleem and Homi delve into the times of their grand-parents and parents; Eugene looks back across seven generations; and Krishna to four generations. Variations abound. The narrator is empowered to jog and scan the memory of his ancestors. This scanning does not stop with personal histories alone. It spills into events of social and political significance in the respective eras and sets in motion a reanalysis of life in past centuries from the vantage point of the present.

The collective, therefore, stands scripted as the family (genealogical and conceptual) in the family saga. This reaffirmation of collective ties is a social patterning growing out of contemporary needs. India, for long typified by a joint and extended family system, has this image built into her ancient epics: The Ramayana and The Mahabharata. Intra-family jealousy and rivalry is at the root of the narratives in both epics. The social unity this stresses and privileges becomes the subject for discursive analysis in the four novels looked at in the ensuing chapters.

Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 5 analyse these concerns through close reading of Midnight's Children, Yatra, The Trotter-Nama and The Memory of Elephants, respectively, while the concluding Chapter 6 links the arguments of the preceding chapters. In doing so, the viability of the family saga as a sub-genre and as a paradigm to dissect contemporary issues

and concerns such as collective identity, collective memory, integration of minorities, dominant and recessive social cum cultural expressions will also be traced.

Notes:

1. OED, 2nd ed., Vol.XIV (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1989), p.364.
2. The census figures are those of 1981 as corresponding figures based on the 1991 cesus report have not yet been released by the Government of India.

See Census of India, 1981, Series-1, India, Paper 3 of 1984: Household Population by Religion of Head of Household, V.S. Verma of the Indian Administrative Service, Registrar General and Census Commissioner for India.

3. *ibid.*, pp.vii-viii.

Table of major religious communities in India arranged in order of numerical strength at all-India level

Religious Community	Persons	Percentage to total population
1	2	3
Hindus	549,779,481	82.64
Muslims	75,512,439	11.35
Christians	16,165,447	2.43
Sikhs	13,078,146	1.96
Buddhists	4,719,796	0.71
Jains	3,206,038	0.48

4. *ibid.*, p.65. Based on Annexure HH-15; Anglo-Indian population given statewise.

State	No. of Persons	State	No. of Persons
A.P.	23	Kerala	28
Karnataka	144	M.P.	31
Maharashtra	41	Delhi	6

The Trotter-Nama itself offers an enumeration of Anglo-Indians: "...there aren't very many of us left. May be a hundred thousand, may be two, counting bazar-side Anglos. The Sikhs are two percent of the Indian population - well, we're two percent of that" (p.5).

5. Census of India, 1981, Series-1, Paper 3 of 1984, p.58. Appendix A. Population following Zoroastrianism - 71,630.
6. R. Parthasarathy in 'Homecoming' from Rough Passage (1977). Ten Twentieth-Century Indian Poets, ed. R. Parthasarathy (Delhi: OUP, ,1976), p.80.
7. Aijaz Ahmad, 'Disciplinary English: Third Worldism and Literature', Rethinking English: Essays in Literature, Language, History, ed. Svati Joshi (New Delhi: Trianka, 1991).

CHAPTER II

MIDNIGHT'S CHILDREN

...perhaps the story you finish is never the one you begin ...if I began again, would I, too, end in a different place?

- Midnight's Children¹

The narrative in Midnight's Children comprises many longings: those of the narrator for omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence; the longing to reconstitute the past in order to be free of fear; to be free of history when history threatens to overwhelm; the longing for wholeness - metaphorical and literal; the longing for acceptance and security; for understanding and power; the longing to rewrite the present. Language, the site of articulation of these longings, is rooted in the circumstances and aftermath of the birth of the Indian nation and in a dialectic across political and conceptual borders. Here, 'political borders' refers to divisions involving power and agency, while 'conceptual borders' refers to differences and elasticities grounded in time.

Saleem Sinai's narrative is prompted by his "desperate need for meaning" (MC, 198)² at a stage in life when as it happened to Nadir Khan, "life...refused to remain life-sized" (50) and instead turned annunciator-cum-metaphor for

a nation's creation and desecration. History and ancestry meet in Saleem, and his narrative, even in its unreliable parts, records this meeting accurately. Saleem stands at the intersecting point of the Aziz Sinai generations and the thousand-and-one children of midnight hour. Both are fictional families -- one, genealogically traced, the other, imaginatively gelled. Saleem's excursions between the two; his twin loyalties and their final recoil onto himself; his reluctant acknowledgement of a more powerful alter-ego in Shiva; his triple exile and his gradual self-knowledge that is corollary to self-disintegration, involve a complex re-orientation of the individual to the collective, of the private to the public.

The narrative defines and establishes its own version of truth -- one in which as Saleem explains: "...what actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe" (325). Twice, such an outlook is tested: first, when Saleem feeds Padma the story of Cyrus-the-great turned Lord Khusrovand, and second, when Saleem confesses to having lied about Shiva's death, whereby the process of narrative persuasion is rendered suspect and the reader turns wary. This confessed deviance from narrative truth has a subtler impact -- it jolts the reader out of any sense of complacency which accompanies the assured anticipation of the next turn in the

narrative; in this case, complacency settles in from knowing one is very near the 'end'. Thus, even in contradicting itself, the narrative demands continuous trust as it fills gaps and absences in history with fiction. "Sometimes legends make reality and become more useful than fact", Saleem says, blurring the distinction between history and fiction.

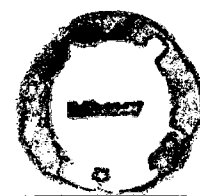
The insistence on the collective goes beyond just the family. The collective as society, generally maintains status-quo, but becomes an empowering phenomenon in its creative aspect. Hence, though Saleem is discovered to be a changeling, it "*made no difference*" (136) to the entire Sinai family. As Saleem puts it, "we learned that we simply could not think our way out of our pasts" (137). This is described as "a kind of collective failure of imagination" (136-7) interlocking into a live-and-let-live philosophy. Ernest Renan highlights this ability to 'forget' as a crucial ingredient of the 'glue' that holds collectivities together.³

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Similarly, the power of the collective to will-into-being is encountered in the narrative's description of the birth of India:

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Q,111944,3:2(Y,2)N
N3

a nation which had never previously existed was about to win its freedom, catapulting us into a world which, although it had five thousand years of history, although it had invented the game of



chess and traded with Middle Kingdom Egypt, was nevertheless quite imaginary; into a mythical land, a country which would never exist except by the efforts of a phenomenal *collective will* - except in a *dream we all agreed to dream*...India, the new myth -- a collective fiction in which anything was possible.... (129-130)⁴

This emphasis on the 'collective will to dream' as in the 'collective failure of imagination' fixes a public experience of the private sphere, especially in Saleem's life, so that the narrative to all obvious intents implying a reading from private to public, also seems to hold the potential for a reverse reading, i.e. from public to private.

At this level, the collective in the private sphere is raised from individual to family, i.e. from Saleem to the Aziz Sinai families; and the obfuscations of identity (Saleem is not ascriptively a Sinai) are goaded into releasing multitudes of meanings and implications. Collective procreation occurs at the narrative level (Midnight's Children has an epic/harikatha/oral recitation ancestry) and in the life of Saleem (the numerous fathers and women who inadvertently or otherwise contribute meaning to his life). In a suggestive intertwining of both levels -- that of narrative and of new life -- the narrator writes of the foetus in Amina's womb:

What had been (at the beginning) no bigger than a full stop had expanded into a comma, a word, a sentence, a paragraph, a chapter; now it was bursting into more complex developments, becoming,

one might say, a book -- perhaps an encyclopaedia
-- even a whole language.... (115)

Such a celebration of birth, newness and beginnings is reiterated continuously until the end. For, even after the 'cracks' begin to show on Saleem, hope for the future is contained in the birth of Aadam Sinai, who is not only a representative of the tougher Emergency-born generation but who is also the true grandson and the direct genealogical descendent of Aziz Sinai.

Again, Saleem Sinai, who sees himself as 'perennial victim' and as 'protagonist', is aware that he is linked to history both literally and metaphorically, both actively and passively; hence, all of history arranges itself around him in one or more of the four "modes of connection": the active-literal, the passive-metaphorical, the active-metaphorical and the passive-literal (285-6). Saleem's experience teaches him that "Reality can have metaphorical content" (240); Jamila consigns him to the "metaphorical waste-basket of Army life" (461) after he has confessed his 'incestuous' love for her; and the metaphor even drips into the psychology of the baby Aadam Sinai who is caught in a seemingly incurable illness that has "something darkly metaphorical" (504) about it.

The fecundity of the narrative, its proliferation into people and events are severely limited by the logic of the

tale. Like any promising recit, Midnight's Children starts at the moment of birth; and it withstands the temptation to fritter itself away in fairy-tale generalizations, such as a "once upon a time" genesis. The celebration of birth is sharply counterpointed by the fear of absurdity and the definite knowledge of life ebbing out. A reminder of an approaching thirty-first birthday permits only a frenzied urge to regurgitate the multitudinous stories that have lodged within. Like Scheherazade, Saleem is under pressure to "work fast" (4) but unlike the legendary lady, this first of the thousand-and-one siblings has no thousand-and-one future nights to spin out his soul.

Midnight's Children recalls not only the Arabian Nights. It harks back to The Mahabharata which informs Midnight's Children's sub-liminal repertoire and which, to an extent determines the novel's narrative form too. Van Buitinen remarks that the character of The Mahabharata in its present form "lies more in the stories that have accreted around its basic core than in the core itself."⁵ Midnight's Children too captures the profligacy of such narrative nesting and draws it to a finer conclusion in that the basic core (the meaning of Saleem's life) is irremediably intertwined and is also the genesis of most of the accretions surrounding it.

Both The Mahabharata and Midnight's Children stress the over-arching importance of truth. The absence of a verified author for The Mahabharata is noted by van Buitinen: "A Vyasa is named as 'author' of The Mahabharata; but he is also named as author of the eighteen major Puranas, and as the compiler of the four Vedas."⁶ The improbability of single authorship and the fact that the epic is hardly a one-time creation leads us to believe that the name, Vyasa, is merely symbolic. "And this", says van Buitinen, "while unsatisfactory to a Western mode of thinking that needs historical order, is significant. The truth is more important than the individual who gives it voice."⁷ Midnight's Children echoes this reasoning in a different manner. The concern with truth is no less imperative, and it acquires an urgency brought on by the inevitability of forced, premature annihilation. The autodiegetic narrator is aware of his victimhood and his final effort is to recall and 'pickle' memories so that truth is unravelled and preserved and in that process, the historical and psychological circumstances and impact of his existence get immortalised. The voice is important only so far as it is the vehicle for truth.

Mikhail Bakhtin in his essay 'Epic and Novel: Towards a Methodology for the Study of the Novel' maintains that the epic is

indifferent to formal beginnings and can remain

incomplete (that is, where it concludes is almost arbitrary). The absolute past is closed and completed in the whole as well as in any of its parts.... The specific "impulse to end" ...is absolutely excluded from the epic by both internal and external motifs [since the plotline is already known].⁸

The specific "impulse to continue" (what will happen next?) and the "impulse to end" (how will it end?) characterize only the novel genre, given its "semantic open-endedness, [its] living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present)."⁹ In Midnight's Children, this zone of proximity and contact is enlivened by the historical repercussions Saleem's every move, even unpremeditated ones, have on his family life. Epic heroism, in terms of the narrator and in terms of action is inverted. Saleem is an ineffectual anti-hero and all the political impulses that accompany the birth of India dissipate into empty platitudes. Character, action and event are consequently robbed of authority and initiative wherever the constructive or the creative is involved. Saleem himself, though the crucial instigator of all that happens in Midnight's Children, fades into social insignificance during his life. His contribution to the determination of history is unbelievable, and goes unknown and unsung, until Saleem in a last desperate bid to leave a legacy that can be connected to him, attempts to record it in writing. However, the temporal movement of the novel is such that the whole-

ness of the narrative concludes only with the annihilation/death of the narrator.

The vestiges of creativity come to the fore only when Saleem assumes an autodiegetic role in the narrative. According to Gerard Genette, the autodiegetic narrator is one who is inside the narrative and who is also its principal character. Saleem's autodiegeticism stems from his sure sensing of his end. On this plane, Midnight's Children becomes, partly, an exercise in meta-narrative critique. Even as the narrative stresses the importance of form, recurrence and shape, the life-story and the written script threaten to jump conventions. As Saleem puts it, "I am have always been in the grip of a form-crazy destiny" (531). Form returns in the recurrence of symbolic motifs such as the perforated sheet that drew Aadam Aziz to Naseem, and which, two generations later, divided an unwilling Jamila from a love-lorn Saleem. The gradual realization of Ramram's prophecy about the midnight child adds shape and circularity to the narrative. At the end, the many beginnings are recalled and reaffirmed. The autodiegetic narrator asserts this as his "overpowering desire for form" (379), and draws it out with a generalization to include the sweep of history:

As a people, we are obsessed with correspondences. Similarities between this and that, between apparently unconnected things, make us clap our hands

delightedly when we find them out. It is a sort of national longing for form -- or perhaps simply an expression of our deep belief that forms lie hidden within reality; that meaning reveals itself only in flashes. Hence our vulnerability to omens.... (p.359)

The Achilles heel in this desire for form is the tendency to over-read, to over-signify, i.e. to see omens in coincidences. In the meta-narrative sense, it emerges not into myth/archetype but into an inversion of myth and into what C. Kananayakam calls "fabulosity", i.e. "a mode which moves away from a direct representation of reality into something that is deliberately self-conscious and sometimes fantastic in order to establish different modes of perception."¹⁰ Fabulosity or fabulation in Midnight's Children directly results from Saleem's midnight gift of seeing into the minds of people combined with the indissoluble link between the destinies of Saleem and India which, Saleem says, was "not only my twin-in-birth but also joined to me... so that what happened to either of us, happened to us both" (461).

The plethora of events, experiences and effects that complement and complete the Saleem-India relationship are anchored by the leitmotif of MULTIPLICITY. Not only is the multiple effect sustained through the numerous acquaintances-friends-families Saleem's life accumulates but also through spatial motifs such as recurring references to blue

eyes (Adam Aziz's, William Methwold's, Saleem's, Aadam Sinai's), to perforated sheets, to jewels, to the lapis-lazuli inlaid spittoon, to washing-chests and peep-shows, to the fathers Saleem acquires (Methwold, Ahmed Sinai, Hanif Aziz, Sharpsticker sahib, General Zulfikar and Picture Singh), to the women who have been catalysts to his experiences (Mary Pereira, Amina Sinai, Naseem/Reverend Mother, Brass Monkey/Jamila, Evie Burns, Parvati, Padma/dung-lotus), to the thousand-and-one children of the midnight hour, each of whom is endowed with an extraordinary gift; to the numerous deaths which contact with Saleem causes, to the recurring periods of exile, to the multitudinous beginnings and ends, and finally to the multiple cracks that break up Saleem's world.

Saleem's fear of such prolixity stems from his inability to control what he sets in motion. For instance, he cannot hold together the M.C.C. (the Midnight Children's Conference) once his leadership is seriously questioned by Shiva. This fear translates into his wariness and disquietude concerning crowds of any sort. Saleem describes crowds as a "many-headed monster" (336). They serve as metaphor for anything uncontrollable. Saleem's destiny was rooted in Bombay life which was "as multitudinously shapeless as ever" (148). Saleem considers himself "master of numbers" as "multitudes have teemed inside my head" and can

hold anaesthesia for double the average count of TEN but succumbs to being tricked by his parents into undergoing a sinus operation. Again, the 1971 Bangladesh liberation war had its root cause traced to "the biggest migration in the history of the human race" (427) -- an infiltration of ten million refugees. India, too, is described as a country dominated by the "twin multitudes of noises and smells" (507). All of Saleem's world, is therefore, a turmoil of numbers and multitudes.

The narrative by juggling identities, questioning chronology, positing idiosyncracies and alternating frustration and danger, leads to a reappraisal of important definitives in family and social life. The family saga in Midnight's Children spans four generations -- Aadam Aziz and Naseem; Amina and Ahmed Sinai; Saleem; and the baby, Aadam Sinai. The events in the novel do not impinge on Saleem alone, or on a larger scale, on generalized history alone. More regularly and immediately, the ramificatory effects are seen on his family. The first impression the reader has of the family is through the elaborate picture of Aadam Aziz as a young Heidelberg returned doctor, whose break in life comes with his curing the numerous ailments of his wife-to-be. Aadam Aziz suffers two reverses in his native Kashmir: his German study-trip alienates Tai, the aged shikara-man, and leads to a partly-forced, partly-voluntary self-exile

from Kashmir; secondly, there grows a "hole" within Aziz, where religion and God should have been, as he gets caught in a "strange middle ground, trapped between belief and disbelief" (6). His Heidelberg years bring home to him the Heidelbergians' perception of India. A land with five thousand years of indigenous cultural history was patronised in Heidelberg merely as yet another "discovery" of the Europeans; a kind of poor twin to the discovery of radium. Aziz's voluntary withdrawal from his German friends follows his shocked realization that they believed "that he was somehow the invention of *their* ancestors" (6).¹¹ In refusing their friendship, Aziz is thereby refusing to be fictionalized, mythicized or fantasised into oblivion. He is unwilling to doubt the reality and uniqueness of his own existence; and hence, Tai's denial of Aziz's worth, coming as the denial does from a native who claimed an antiquity "so immense it defied numbering" (9), evokes in Aziz "the resentful anger of a cast-off child" (17).

The essential themes of this family-saga are clearly set out in this first encounter itself. The father-son emotional bond extended to include people outside the family proper; the longing to belong to family and society in one's own right (a version of what would later develop in Saleem to a "lust for centrality"); the legacy of extra large noses (Aziz's nose is called a "cyranose" by Ilse Lubin and a

"probocissimus" by Ingrid); the knife-edged choices that partitions offer; and the anxieties of unexpected, unprepared for exiles.

In fact, most of the characters are displaced in varying degrees from their intended roles. Simultaneously, the family fabric expands and each who is/acts parent to Saleem, seals his/her bond by leaving Saleem an inheritance. The division between natural fathers and acquired fathers blurs as features of Saleem's genetic inheritances are derived as easily from the one as from the other. Thus, Aziz's legacy of a cyranose is inherently deceptive because it sustains the illusion of genetic inheritance when in truth, Saleem is not biologically the grandson of Aziz. Other inheritances Saleem comes into which cement the family saga framework include Nadir's lapis-lazuli spittoon, Methwold's (Saleem's biological father) blue eyes -- a feature shared by Aadam Aziz, Ahmed Sinai's patronym, Hanif Aziz's protection and shelter during Saleem's first exile, Sharpsticker Sahib's emotional and physical curative -- snake venom, General Zulfikar's mantle and trust as military pupil and son, and finally, Picture Singh's loyalty to Saleem and his son.

The first jolt this serial about a family's history receives is born out of the realization that Saleem's blood group matches neither his father's nor mother's blood groups. To a boy already beginning to feel the brunt of

expectations of genius arising from the unusual prophecies that annunciated his arrival, this and Mary Pereira's confession which happens a little later, bring into the open, latent fears of non-acceptance and rootlessness. It also posits the existence of an alter-ego i.e. the twin changeling. The changeling motif, an old staple of popular fiction and movies, is used almost in a parodic way by Rushdie, although it generates its own meaning as the novel progresses. It significantly disturbs the genealogical lineage. What starts as family history suddenly threatens to stall. The narrator holds out hope only in his insistence on addressing family members in their role relationship to him -- as "my father" and "my mother" in referring to Ahmed and Amina Sinai even after the news of the baby-switch invalidates his position as a son of the family.

Though in later years Saleem will reason out that the confession "made no difference" in the way the Sinais treated him, he would attribute it to their weakness in being unable to let go of their pasts. Such objectification of a personally traumatising experience is drawn out of memories of that first exile, when, discharged from the hospital, Saleem is collected not by his parents but by his uncle, Hanif Aziz who takes him to spend the next few weeks at his home until Ahmed and Amina come to terms with the truth. The most important characteristic of any family saga - the

CONTINUITY of line, is jeopardised here.

Similarly, Saleem's other and secret family of the surviving five hundred and eighty one midnight children is denied the capacity to reproduce due to the selective but piercing political vengeance perpetrated during the Emergency. Even magic seems to have lost its power to redeem. The changeling episode can therefore be seen as a deliberate tool introduced into the family saga to induce new modes of perception. What happens to a life-story which is founded on the axes of two families and is threatened with disintegration both ways? What does Saleem's search graduate into -- a search for true roots, for an alter-ego or into a yearning to capsule the integrity of the past and reproduce it by rewriting the present?

The probings here turn Saleem into a symbol even as it does his alter-ego, Shiva, the baby Mary Pereira had switched with Saleem. Two important readings are necessary at this juncture -- the narrative use of class and religion and their impact on the ethics and values which constitute the emerging nation and its people.

Mary Pereira's intentions in making the baby-switch were influenced by memories of a lost lover's recriminations and were aimed at giving one 'poor' baby a chance to make it big in life. Her intentions and the actual wide class gulf

between the well-to-do Sinai family and the street performer Wee Willee Winkie's family foreground the class dimension. The now poor baby, named Shiva, unaware of his birthright, becomes Saleem's guilt ridden conscience's keeper. The contrast between the two children is evident at the parliament of the midnight children which Saleem summons in his head. Their sharp differences on ideas of leadership anchors basic character differences. Saleem portrays himself as standing for an integrated, democratic, unified group effort; Shiva for an autocratic leadership smacking of ruffianism. As Shiva reasons:

Lissen, my father said I got born at exactly midnight also -- so don't you see, that makes us joint bosses of this gang of yours! Midnight is best, agreed? So -- those other kids gotta do like we tell them! (26)

Every news of Shiva comes through Saleem's shifting consciousness. Saleem's fear of his fellow-changeling, whom he describes as "the most formidable of the midnight children" (261) is partly due to an apprehension of the dangers and vengeance that Shiva would unleash on him if the latter ever came to know the truth of his birth.

Shiva is throughout described in his destructive aspect. Saleem's first mind-flash of Shiva shows him "the terrifying image of a short, rat-faced youth with filed-down teeth and two of the biggest knees the world has ever seen"

(262). Shiva is synonymous with "terrifying, non-chalant violence" (262). A gang boss since eight, he speaks like a typical representative of the dispossessed class. Badly scarred emotionally by his fight for survival from his earliest days (which included breaking Wee Willie Winkie, his father's, wrist when the latter tried to maim him in order to transform him into an authentic beggar-boy), Shiva is naturally bitter about life. When Saleem tries to persuade Shiva into letting the M.C.C. explore the "purpose" and "reason" for the birth of these midnight children, Shiva snarls:

Rich kid.... What *purpose*, man? What thing in the whole sister-sleeping world got *reason*, yara? For what reason you're rich and I'm poor? Where's the reason in starving, man? ...you got to get what you can, do what you can with it, and then you got to die. That's reason, rich boy. Everything else is only mother-sleeping wind!' (263-4)

Saleem's moralizing against Shiva's deviant characteristics further separate them socially: "I didn't like Shiva. I disliked the roughness of his tongue, the crudity of his ideas; and I was beginning to suspect him of a string of terrible crimes" (271). By casting Shiva as the agency of violence and destruction, Saleem was scoring a moral advantage.

An example of Saleem's flabby rhetoric poised against Shiva's rugged and crude language as in the passage quoted

below, shows that the author is aware of Saleem's vulnerability.

[Saleem] explained, "That wasn't exactly my idea for the Conference; I had in mind something more like a, you know, sort of loose federation of equals, all points of view given free expression...." Something resembling a violent snort echoed around the walls of my head. "That, man, that's only rubbish. What we ever goin' to do with a gang like that? Gangs gotta have bosses. You take me --" (the puff of pride again) "I been running a gang up here in Matunga for two years now. Since I was eight. Older kids and all. What d'you think of that?" And I, without meaning to, "What's it do, your gang -- does it have rules and all?" Shiva-laughter in my ears.... "Yah, little rich boy: one rule. Everybody does what I say or I squeeze the shit outa them with my knees!" Desperately, I continued to try and win Shiva round to my point of view: "The thing is, we must be here for a purpose, don't you think? I mean, there has to be a reason, you must agree? So what I thought, we should try and work out what it is, and then, you know, sort of dedicate our lives to...." "Rich kid," Shiva yelled, "you don't know one damn thing!...." (263)

It is not that readers must believe in Saleem's moral superiority. In true dialogic fashion both the boys are presented in their oppositional roles while the author carefully avoids completely privileging one over the other.

Shiva's justification of his nature almost goes unclaimed. Unlike Saleem who accepts the vagaries of his situation with a sense of wonder, Shiva, beaten by hardship and poverty, is a radical believing in the only strength he has - brute strength - to offset the pressures of the world. He recognizes only one version of history that "history

could only be explained as the continuing struggle of one-self-against-the-crowd" (339). While Saleem can afford to think of himself and the M.C.C. as the third and potent principle which can offer an alternative to the "endless duality of masses and classes, capital-and-labour" (306), and which would also substitute ambiguity as the third principle (cf. Snakes & Ladders), Shiva, in amused scornfulness, insists:

No little rich boy; there is no third principle; there is money-and-poverty, and have-and-lack, and right-and-left; there is only me-against-the-world! The world is not ideas, rich boy; the world is no place for dreamers or their dreams; the world, little Snotnose is things. Things and their makers rule the world; look at Birla, and Tata, and all the powerful: they make things. For things, the country is run. Not for people. For things, America and Russia send aid; but five hundred million stay hungry. When you have things, then there is time to dream; when you don't, you fight (307).

Saleem's world does not lose hope until the end of the narrative, and even then, not wholly. His initial sharpness gives way to a naivete and then briefly succumbs to sperec-tomy i.e. the draining-out of all hope. Shiva's outlook on life places all hope within his power to control and to coerce his environment. The standards of measurement, therefore, cannot be the same. Social justice and hence, poetic/narrative justice cannot embrace Saleem and Shiva on the same wavelength.

Yet, a closer analysis of Saleem's narrative shows a truth quite different from Saleem's perception of his own reality. Violence is not Shiva's forte alone. Saleem too is prone to bursts of violence and planned vengeance. Besides, for all his connection to history, Saleem fails when voluntary dignified altruism is expected of him. He thinks himself responsible for dreaming-into-reality Jimmy Kapadia's death. This is of much less consequence than two other events. One is the Colonel Sabarmati episode where Saleem, like a snake, strikes from cover, using his telepathic powers as a weapon for the first time. The Colonel's killing of Homi Catrack for seducing his wife, Lila Sabarmati, has the mark of Saleem's vengeance born of confused connections to his aunt Pia's grief and to his mother's clandestine visits to the Pioneer cafe to see her first husband Nadir (now Qasim, the Red). The second and more unforgivable episode is Saleem's betrayal of the midnight children to the Widow.

In addition, Saleem is indirectly responsible for Evie Burns's criminalization, a process he set in motion when he forced his way into the recesses of her mind. In course of time, Saleem comes to realize that "very few people who have come into contact with me have been vouchsafed a natural death" (324), and this does not happen only because Saleem cannot help it. Rather, Saleem's deliberate passivity and

occasionally, active collaboration, cause many deaths. Some of the deaths he is directly responsible for include those of Ayoooba, Farooq and Shaheed of the CUTIA unit, and that of the numerous "undesirables" Saleem sniffs out for death in the Indo-Bangladesh war. His passivity and indifference to life other than his -- a side effect of Saleem's bloated egoism, leaves him a barren world, where even his family and childhood friends are killed. Saleem is reduced to a position no different from Shiva's.

At this point, Saleem bears the weight of India's Independence, the offspring of which

were not all human. Violence, corruption, poverty, generals, chaos, greed and pepperpots... [Saleem] had to go into exile to learn that the children of midnight were more varied than [even he]... had dreamed. (350)

Perhaps, the facts of Saleem's personal acts of vengeance and betrayal do not stand out as evil due to the fluidity of the Indian social fabric. India's proneness to political, communal and linguistic disharmony has plenty of evidence in the novel. Aadam Aziz throws out the Maulvi who teaches his children not the Nastaliq script but hatred towards Hindus, Buddhists, Jains and Sikhs. When Lifafa Das enters the Muslim muhalla with his peepshow, he is abused for being a Hindu and is almost killed but for Amina Sinai who boldly and openly shelters him in her home. Riots and rioteers

rise for almost any cause, as the demand for the partition of Bombay and the rivalry between patrons of Gujarati and Marathi prove. The political suppression of the Islamic conference and later, of communism; the burning of Ahmed Sinai's leather factory by a group of vandals calling themselves by Ravana's name; the rumblings caused by the theft of hair from Hazratbal Shrine in Kashmir; the political subterfuge during the Emergency which resulted in entire communities of slum-dwellers being bull-dozed into oblivion; the two partition wars and their aftermaths, all present a seething politically, communally and linguistically divided reality.

Shiva is caught like Sere in a mass movement of fanaticism. Saleem has the opportunity and the education to stand outside this movement, despite which he ultimately makes the same mistakes as Shiva. Both, given the Indian susceptibility to the desire for form, own names that pre-empt and capsule their destinies. Shiva, the principle of destruction is also, finally, the only hope among the midnight children for creation and continuity. While ectomy pulverizes the four hundred and twenty children caught alive, Shiva had already unleashed numerous offspring both amongst the elites and amongst the poor, including the baby born to Parvati who is christened Adam Sinai since Saleem marries Parvati to give the child legitimacy. On the one

hand, while the Shiva-Parvati union is a re-enactment of the mythic union of the Hindu gods reminding the readers of India's vulnerability to form, on the other hand, it brings to ironic completion the Aziz Sinai family continuity.

The pluralism that Rushdie sets out to evoke¹² is undercut by the complexities of the human variables. Saleem's Sunderbans exile - a period of numbness, of a lost name, of faded and vanished emptiness where memories should have been -- is a penance to reconnect with the world. It is a cathartic reconstruction to give back to Saleem the unity of being he draws strength from. The promise of new life and continuity that Parvati and Aadam Sinai hold out is compromised by Saleem's magic reality which reminds him constantly of a journey's end. Symbolically, Saleem loses his spittoon, the "receptacle of memories" (535) and on his return to Bombay, faces the unpleasant inevitability of the future invading the present -- in the form of the underworld's M.C.C., the Midnite-Confidential Club. While old myths collapse and new myths are yet to stand on their feet, Saleem achieves through his narrative the "chutnification of history", the "pickling of time" (548), the immortalizing of his memories and the privileging of a recalled and hence, perhaps factually incorrect history. A private memory captures a public's imagination and the reader is caught continuously and constantly between the "collective will to

dream" and the "collective failure of imagination". If the collective will to dream ensures the possibility of creating and nurturing non-biological families, the collective failure of imagination permits those families to survive.

Outside this truth, Saleem is aware that he regresses to a "peripheral role" -- the traditional function of reminiscer, of teller-of-tales. Within, he can offer no alternatives but only one stubborn stance at the end of it all: "It happened that way because that's how it happened" (549).

Notes:

1. Salman Rushdie, Midnight's Children (1980. New York: Albert A. Knopf Inc.; New York: Avon, 1982), p.509. Hereafter referred to as MC.
2. Hereafter, in this Chapter, quotes with page numbers given in brackets will refer to the text of Midnight's Children.
3. Ernest Renan, 'What is a nation?', trans. Martin Thom from Nation and Narration, ed. Homi K. Bhabha (London: Routledge, 1990).
4. Italics added.
5. J.A.B. van Buitinen, 'The Formation of the *Mahabharata*' from The Literatures of India: An Introduction, Edward C. Dimock, Jr., Edwin Gerow, C.M. Naim, A.K. Ramanujan, Gordon Roadarmal, J.A.B. van Buitenan (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1st edn. 1974, rpt. 1978), p.50.
6. ibid., p.52.
7. ibid.
8. Mikhail Bakhtin from Essentials of the Theory of Fiction ed. Michael Hoffman and Patrick Murphy (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1988), p.59.
9. ibid., pp.52-3.
10. C. Kanakanayakam, 'Myth and Fabulosity in *Midnight's Children*' as quoted by M.D. Fletcher in 'An Annotated Bibliography of Articles about Salman Rushdie's Fiction', The Journal of Indian Writing in English, ed. G.S. Balarama Gupta, Gulbarga: Vol.20, Jan.-July 1992, Nos.1&2, p.11.
11. Italics added.
12. See 'Errata': Or, Unreliable narrrtion in Midnight's Children from Salman Rushdie, Imaginary Homelands: Essays & Criticism, 1981-1991 (London: Granta Books, 1981, reprint 1991).

CHAPTER III

YATRA

We need to restore to ourselves a sense of wholeness, a sense of identity, of knowing who we are and what our shape is. And others must know it, too; they must see us before them, clean and whole.

- Yatra¹

Nina Sibal's Yatra (1987) takes as its fictional material the aspirations and the struggle of four generations of a Sikh family in Punjab. Their struggle has been to survive with dignity and to find their place culturally and nationally in the Indian social fabric. Yatra, meaning journey, is a leitmotif in the novel for the course of this struggle.

The novel occupies a time-frame stretching from 1849 after the defeat of Maharajah Dalip Singh and the annexation of the Punjab by the British right upto 1984, when a sixth generation member of the Chahal family-line is already a school-going boy. In our reading of Punjab's history across this sweep of one-hundred-and-thirty-five years, it is possible to trace in a specific manner the political and cultural changes that have enveloped the Sikhs in Punjab and the impact of these changes on the biological and social construction of families and lineages in the Punjab.

Yatra is highly indebted to Midnight's Children for its

fictional strategies. The parallels are numerous and crucial. For instance, the central figures in both Yatra and in Midnight's Children do not belong to India's dominant tradition. One is a Sikh woman, the other, a Muslim boy. Both have a mixed heritage and are attributed with magical qualities. Both figures are part of an ample historical and geographical narrative sweep, and both novels use as pivot, a trope suggesting irreversible change.

Despite such borrowings, Yatra still lends itself for fruitful analysis along another dimension: that of gender, for the novel manifests a feminisation of narrative and subsumes plot, character and metaphor within this narrative purpose.

The central figure who is also the primary narrator in Yatra is Krishna. Just as Saleem in Midnight's Children is equipped with an ability to read minds, so too Krishna is born with a biological barometer -- her skin -- which changes colour from milky white to shades of darkness, emphasising a gradual physical and emotional bonding to India. The darkening of Krishna's skin posits a process of Indianising whose significance is rooted in the ambiguities and social blocks with which a cross-cultural, inter-national and inter-religious marriage invests the partners to that marriage and their offspring.

Yatra is, therefore, not the story of Krishna alone but more importantly and to a certain extent vicariously, the story of the Chahal brothers of Kohat -- Satinder Singh and Paramjit Singh, their commitments and loyalties; of their ancestors Manmohan Singh and Swaranjit Kaur; of the loneliness and displacement of intractable women such as Kailash Kaur and Sonia (Krishna's grand-aunt and mother, respectively) and of the logic of terrorists and communists who hold sway over Punjab's political apparatus. It is a yatra webbed through many kinds of relationships: that of father and daughter (Paramjit Singh and Krishna, Satinder and his niece, Krishna); brother and sister (Manmohan Singh and Swaranjit Kaur, Sampuran and Poonam, Krishna and Gola); husband and wife (Palji and Kailash Kaur, Paramjit and Sonia, Satinder and Poonam, Krishna and Anu); and even extra-marital relationships (Swaranjit Kaur and her nameless lover; Kailash Kaur and her nephew, Prakash; Paramjit and his junior doctor, Dhiraj Kumari; Sonia and the Greek, Michael Stavros; Sonia and Anjali's husband, Surjit Markhand; and finally Krishna and Ranjit Dhawan).

The crisis in Yatra is precipitated by the breakdown of family units in Paramjit's family. Paramjit, a doctor in the Indian army, takes as wife, an illiterate Greek, Sonia, who withers under the chauvinistic authority of her husband, his frequent postings away from her and her fear of

loneliness amidst an alien people who speak an alien tongue. The only language which Sonia understands is that of sex, the means by which she communicates with Stavros and later, Markhand. Sonia's likes and dislikes, her prejudices against her husband and her understanding of the country she has married into all stem from a sexual dialogue. Between Paramjit and Sonia, this aspect is never revealed as being emotionally regenerative, at least as far as Sonia is concerned. Her sexual promiscuity with Markhand is landscaped against a field of golden wheat crop ripe for harvesting. But Sonia's recollections of herself with Paramjit are of a harsh and unforgiving nature. Paramjit had posed his 'Greek Goddess' of a wife for the photographs he had taken in Bombay, had been furious with her for being unable to dress in a sari, had slapped her in a taxi on one of her first few days in India and had bluntly and spitefully informed her that by marrying him she had forfeited her Greek passport and her Greek identity and from then on could have only an Indian one.

However, Sonia too is partly responsible for the situation she finds herself in. Having been likened to a goddess in Paros, Sonia resents the deprecatory evaluation India puts her through. On the ship to the Elephanta caves, days before India's Independence, she is subjected to a biting indifference from Europeans due to the fact that though

white, she spoke a strange, non-mainland-European tongue (i.e. Greek) and allowed a brown Indian to possessively place his arm around her. Similarly, when escorted by Paramjit to the dining hall of the hotel where she had stayed soon after her arrival in India, Sonia is conscious of startled British faces accusing her of treason as they watch her accompany a brown man.

Further, Sonia, protected in Paros, is suddenly exposed all at once in India to language barriers, sexual barriers, social barriers and literacy barriers, all of which she is unable to cope with. She also has no family -- not even her in-laws -- to fall back on, as Paramjit's postings take him first to Bombay and then to Secunderabad and in war-time to the frontiers.

Paros remains a distant, mythic name that suffuses nostalgia with unreliable glimmerings of perfection. In reality, war-time Paros had become a trap Sonia had desired to escape. In a sense, Sonia's disloyalty to her country extends to her personal life. One of the first conventions she breaks easily and quickly, is of sexual fidelity in marriage. Her dislike of anything Indian extends to the man she has married. Even Stavros and Markhand are unable to bring her fully into the folds of India. Her daughter, Krishna, when born, becomes a "stake" driving Sonia firmly

into India and to Paramjit. The image of the stake is drawn from the English custom of burying at cross-roads people who had committed suicide and of driving a stake through their hearts so as to fix their souls from wandering. Even after Krishna's birth, Sonia's subconscious yearning for freedom is kept alive by the doubtful fatherhood of her daughter. The hope vanishes with the slow darkening and hence India-nising of Krishna's skin, and Sonia stands forlorn in the novel, except for the one weapon she holds and uses frequently against Paramjit and his family and friends -- the weapon of social disruption.

The child of such resentment is Krishna, named by her father for her darkening skin. This darkening skin is a central trope in the novel. It gives the protagonist, Krishna, a magical attribute of the same portentous nature as Saleem's ability to read minds. In doing so, it enables Krishna, consciously and unconsciously, to receive and register vibes/information in any way connected to her family, her lineage and to her country. The social waves which touch her and transform her skin are a direct reflection of history in the making -- both public and private. Thus, like Saleem, Krishna becomes a medium for the reader to relocate and understand at least one strand of India's political and social history.

Krishna's dark skin links her to two of her famous

namesakes from The Mahabharata. One is the dark god, Krishna, a symbol of power. The other and more important equation is Krishnā̄ or Draupadi, the Pandava queen who is a creative force with equally destructive potential and who represents the empowering of the female -- a process paralleled in Yatra by the kinds of life and controlling power women make for themselves in the novel.

Krishna is taught to control power. Her skin serves as a 'barometer' registering the changes in her life.

The remarkable change in her skin's colour had not been gradual.... It had happened in waves and patches, as she nosed out personal and national events, flushing and darkening from them. (Yatra, 3)²

India was "hurting her", making her a "dark, glowing bruise"(4), and continued to do so until she broke free of its protection by forcing herself out of passivity. For too long she had remained her skin's simple audience,

watching the effect of her life upon her skin, how it had responded to the pain of exposure, slowly ripening like a berry, turning from the white of a Greek statue to the purple midnight of India's gods. Krishna belonged to neither (75).

Forced out of passivity and out of a Trishanku state of hanging mid-way, belonging neither to Greece nor to India, Krishna evolves slowly and painfully into a voice first for herself and gradually, for her family, for the women she

meets, for the Punjab, for Sikh political and social effervescence; a voice against evil and corruption, the bane of nascent India. To authenticate and authorise the validity of her experiences and their implications for history and for the present, Krishna resorts to tapping ancestral history, sometimes vicariously peeping into ancestral memory.

The political underpinning of Krishna's bildungsroman begins even while Krishna is in the womb. In Hyderabad, when negotiations for the state's accession to India is on, Krishna kicks from within the womb to protest against the Nizam's insinuations against India and Indians. Later, his disparaging reference to the Army Action in Kashmir has the four month old foetus "pushing and shoving... as if struggling to get out" (22).

Krishna, because of her father's job with the Indian army and her uncle, Satinder's political leanings, is intricately caught in the fortunes of aggression. Both Satinder and Paramjit are repeatedly described as needles sewing together the patchwork called India. This image of a patchwork quilt describes an India in August 1947 when she had just pulled free of British colonialization and was struggling to get the Princely States within her territory to join her. Simultaneously, the patchwork image stresses the contribution of Sikh soldiers such as Paramjit, and Sikh politicians such as Satinder, in sewing this patchwork

together. The soldiers marched willingly to every corner of India -- for example, to Hyderabad to prevent Qasim Razvi from making "a hole in the middle of the new stitching" (21) and to Srinagar, Poonch and Gaur to restitch "torn pieces" of the new fabric. Sikh politicians, on the other hand, staked everything in India and refused a separate Independence for the Punjab. As Satinder stresses, "We have been like needle and thread, sewing the country together, attaching piece after piece firmly to the map." (259) In Yatra the service of both Sikh soldiers and Sikh politicians is noted as an integrating feature in contrast to the activism of the Muslim League during the same period.

Stitching being traditionally associated with women, the patchwork image contributes in a major way to the feminisation of the narrative. The art is elaborated upon in the life-history of Kailash Kaur's grand-aunt, Swaranjit Kaur, who spoke only through the elaborate and exquisite *phulkaris* and *khes* which she stitched. The image has a three-fold purpose. Firstly, it gives a distinctive Punjabi cultural stamp to that which is being created on cloth. Secondly, the creations on cloth articulate the hidden romances and unverballed thoughts that flower in the marginalised community of women. Thirdly, at the political level, the patchwork metaphor of India speaks of a colourful diversity and hybridity which is being sought to be woven

together and preserved whole at the cost of many Sikh lives. The urgency of this stitching and the significance of the need for deftness is a straight derivation from the experience of Punjab's agonising Partition experience when Sir Cyril Radcliffe gave sixty-two per cent of the total area of undivided Punjab and fifty-five per cent of its population to Muslim Pakistan.³ As Khushwant Singh puts it,

The Radcliffe award was as fair as it could be to the Muslims and the Hindus. The one community to which no boundary award could have done justice without doing injustice to others were the Sikhs. Their richest lands, over 150 historical shrines, and half of their population were left on the Pakistan side of the dividing line.⁴

The spectre of homelessness and loss that accompanies partitions infuses the chaos of 1947 and the histories of Krishna's ancestors with a poignancy bordering on weariness. In 1849, Manmohan Singh and Swaranjit Kaur had been forced by British invaders to flee from Sialkot to mountainous Kohat. In 1948 (sic), the withdrawing British prise millions out of Punjab like insects from a furrow. Sardar Sobha Singh Palji's nephews and their families flee Gujarat (a town located on Sher Shah Suri's Road, today situated in Pakistan) when tenants rise against them. The Sikhs are constantly shown shuttling and evacuating; their houses, fields and possessions periodically burnt.

The precedent for homelessness is set by Swaranjit Kaur

and it acquires the status of a family legacy, as it expresses itself in every generation until it becomes a figurative trope in Krishna's life. Swaranjit's displacement is threefold: from Sialkot; from her husband's house when, on their wedding night he bundles her out for not being a virgin; and thirdly, from the world of speech after her inglorious return to her brother's house. This creates for her an invisibility, an anonymity behind which she hides and fades even as her phulkaris and khes grow brighter and brighter. Kailash Kaur's is a displacement of love. Her loneliness, attested by her sister-in-law, Prabhjot Kaur, drives her to find an outlet in her illicit love for her husband's nephew, the green-eyed Prakash. Sonia's feeling of destitution consumes her entire being; her homelessness is a physical division from Greece and from the educated world. Krishna's homelessness is partly a legacy from Sonia and partly a corollary to the independence her education equips her with, which enables her to question what was happening between her parents and to her own marriage. Krishna had for long yearned for a ritual initiation -- here, marriage -- which would give her the solidity of a kinship group. But marriage when it comes bequeaths no sense of belonging; it only disillusioned her further. Krishna initially allows herself to feel that "she did not have the male power to impart belongingness or to draw the

attribute of belongingness into herself" (228). Her later fight is, therefore, partly against this "quality of homelessness" which Sonia identifies as the "poison of India" (28).

Krishna's "rootless anxieties" (61) are intensified by the codes of patriarchy which surround her. Her own father does not believe in leaving inheritances to women. Chaman Bajaj, her father-in-law's friend and an evil presence as far as Krishna is concerned, likens her to a common street-walker who fails in the only worthwhile duty of a woman, which, according to him, is to look after her husband and his family. Such alienation within the home, makes it easier for Krishna to discover Ranjit Dhawan as a fellow-exile. Ranjit had been a loyal colleague to her father in his Red Cross activities across the Bengal border, and would later live a double life as Dr. Sripal Singh, the underground communist leader of the Mazdoor Sabha. As exiles, both Krishna and Ranjit are in the grip of a 'dream of possession'.

This dream, fulfilled outside marriage is synonymous with all the other extra-marital relationships in Yatra. In breaking conventions, each represents a breaching of walls that hem him/her in. Kailash's innate urge is "somehow to push against the walls of her life and flow over them" (40). Sonia's childhood and growing up

had been possessed by a feeling of the sea hemming her in. She had longed to get away. Having been bred on an island had prepared her to go far abroad. But not so far that the walls should swim around her. (6)

In Krishna's case, her tussle with Chaman Bajaj over his subtle invasion of her home leaves her feeling "full of webs, cracks radiating outwards" (89) and hesitant to come out of her cocoon of passivity. The pressures upon her make her feel "a queer sense of unreality... as if she were somehow beginning not to exist" (87). At this juncture, Ranjit Dhawan enters her life as a "perfect wall", putting her "firmly and entirely into the present moment" (122). Acknowledging this, Krishna realizes that in future, she can never defend or hide behind any kind of passive silence. This is made explicit after the Dalip Mehta case, when Ranjit blames Krishna for her silence. Again, this is the first time that Krishna's skin refuses to shelter her cowardice. Krishna is forced into an awareness of what is happening to and around her, and is forced to fight against any involuntary effacement of her personality.

Krishna's exposure to evil and corruption is spread temporally and spatially over a large canvas as she draws continuously from ancestral experience. The plainest and most obvious sense of evil is exuded by the Chaman Bajaj-Father Sherifis-Malik-Bibi Chinti group of people, each

responsible for wrecking an established order. They are opportunists and betrayers, implacably selfish and hypocritically destructive; and their victims are unsuspecting, ordinary innocents. They symbolise and in time become personifications of such evil that their effect on their immediate worlds threatens to be suffocatingly irreversible and inevitable.

One lesson Krishna's ancestors' experience with evil eventually teaches her, is to recognise/sense incarnations of evil. In the novel, one standard, ominous personification is of a woman of "indeterminate age with huge heavy breasts who turns up everywhere, especially when people are in trouble" (290). She is seen at the site of Poonam's death; she betrays Ram Adhikari and appears as Bibi Chinti in Krishna's final trial of strength with Chaman Bajaj. The other personifications, i.e. Father Sherifis and Malik, are crafted as rounded characters in the novel -- the former a foreigner and a smooth-dealing briber and spy who terrorizes the Mukti Bahini freedom fighters and cruelly gloats over their mass death in an explosion arranged by him; the latter, instrumental in arranging Krishna's uncle Satinder's political tour of the Punjab, behind which tour's facade, Malik is responsible for the Armoury raid, is suspected in causing Baba Sampuran's and Ram Adhikari's deaths and Bhim Lal Whig's assassination, and as Krishna and her brother

Gola realize, is responsible for shifting the blame for the assassination onto Satinder, who is Whig's political rival. Symbolically, connecting Father Sherifis and Malik's insidious involvement in similar illegal activities is their vehicle -- the Green Matador van, whose front tyres Paramjit had shot open in his tussle with Father Sherifis in Gaur; which take Malik's raiders to the Armoury; which blocks Bhim Lal Whig's car so that as he gets out he is assassinated; and which is the vehicle the unsuspecting Satinder and his family use for the tour of Punjab. Evil thus becomes a definite entity in Krishna's life -- multifaceted but ominous and omnipresent, and her search as much as Ranjit's is for "some protection against [this] insidious evil" (144) on both an individual and a social scale. Their concerns are congruent with Trotter's concern regarding adulteration and corruption in The Trotter-Nama and with Saleem's concern regarding Emergency excesses in Midnight's Children.

The violence and terrorism that occur in Punjab cannot be explained away as resulting from the machinations of the innately evil alone. Punjab's political, geographical and demographic position gives rise to power politics of a subtle kind. At the time of Partition, writes Khushwant Singh,

The Sikhs were in a peculiar position in the Hindu-Muslim conflict. They professed a neutral creed but were part of the Hindu social system.

They were much the most prosperous section of the Punjabi peasantry and having been nurtured in a martial tradition, more ebullient than their numbers (13 per cent in the Punjab) would warrant. The Sikhs often tried to play the role of peace-makers, but since their sympathies were manifestly Hindu, as the [Partition] rioting increased in intensity, the Muslims quite rightly began to look upon them as an aggressively anti-Muslim element. In any case the Muslims felt that if Pakistan was to bring prosperity to their people, Sikhs who owned the best wheatlands of the Punjab would have to be dispossessed.⁵

This led to a situation where Sikhs cast their lot with the Hindus politically in 1947, a graphic picture captured in Yatra in the career highlights of Paramjit's politician brother - Satinder Singh.

The British-Sikh differences that gave rise to terrorist outfits such as the Babars in Punjab (represented in Yatra by Sampuran and at one stage, Satinder) gives way in 1947 to Sikh-Muslim differences, and after Independence, to internal differences between Sikhs and Hindus. Before and around Independence, terrorism was aimed at either an alien political power (such as the British) or at a power that was definitely antagonistic to Sikh economic, social, cultural and territorial interests (as were the Muslims). However, with Independence, the rise of a new generation of mercenary politicians and their hangers-on (such as Whig, Malik and Bajaj in Yatra) leads to an insidious puppet regime where real power is money power and Sikh religion is used as a gimmick to attract and incite the ignorant masses. The

movement to safeguard Sikh identity therefore becomes a vested interest for various political groups because it is the launching pad for political and eventually economic mileage in fertile Punjab. To this end, the spirit of non-violence that older politicians such as Satinder stand for, is manipulated by a cross-section of post-Independence political inheritors, to suit their mercenary interests. It takes Satinder a lifetime to understand that non-violence meant "taking life entirely and wholly, not violating anything" (226). His inheritors by politicising religion and operating as unethical pressure groups (as was happening all over India) decimate the very principles upon which the Indian Constitution was framed.

The novel provides for a deep-structure reading of the 1980s Punjab politics by positing and evaluating the opinions and speeches made by characters who figure prominently in that field. They include Satinder; his son-in-law and political novice, Sudershan; the leftist Dr. Sripal Singh who is actually Ranjit Dhawan in disguise; Gola and Shalini -- Krishna's younger brother and sister-in-law who are ardent communists heading two different organisations. Their actions and reasonings influence the political mettle of Krishna. In fact, well before the novel begins to treat the Punjab political problem, Krishna has already prepared herself for a transition from a passive marginalised entity

to that of a centre-stage activist. She distances her campaign from power elites and bases it directly amongst village folk. Krishna's padayatra through the Himalayas arguing for conservation of the hill and mountain ecology is treated in the narrative as a sacred one.

Figuratively, it is also a completion of Krishna's own foresensing of the Red Cross leader, Mrs. Pratibha Anand, passing her a mantle and a mission in the service of society. A parallel to this passing-of-a-mission takes this analysis back to Satinder and to a Resettlement Board office in Jullundur when "a strange exchange had taken place between Sardarji and a young boy called Ranjit Dhawan" (249). This exchange is described as the passing of Satinder's 'heart' and 'courage' to the boy, after which Satinder turns back to pacifism and to religion.

The problem of Sikh identity is set in perspective with a kinship-alliance image. Sudershan, Satinder's son-in-law who grows up in Nairobi, explains his need to return to his Sikh village regularly in order to keep in touch; in fact Anita, his wife, comments upon it wryly as his reason for marrying her. Sudershan, the political novice, articulates Punjab's grievances aggressively -- thirty-five years of patience in striving to establish their identity had merely dwindled to endless rounds of pacificatory talks. He re-

calls Sahib Guru Gobind Singh's words: "Blessed are those who keep God in their hearts and swords in their hands to fight a noble cause." (258) The immediate cause here is the lack of water facilities for farmers in the land of once five but now three rivers. Sikh loyalty had been proved beyond doubt by Sikh participation in India's defence on every front including the 1962 and 1971 wars. Yet, as Sudershan aggrievedly puts it, "when [Sikhs] ask intensely for autonomy, the Hindu communal majority screams labels at them: 'Partition', 'Separatism' and so on" (259). Sudershan's case is for a healthy heterogeneity in the patchwork called India and is against any reductionist misapplication suffocating India's diversity into the confines of a "large vilage commune" (260).

When Sudershan addresses the gathering in Ropar, he lists Punjab's immediate grievances: the Beas-Sutlej project which would take more water out of Punjab; the indiscriminate police firing on protestors against the project; the reclaiming of Chandigarh since Punjab has lost her capital thrice over (i.e. Lahore, Shimla, Chandigarh); the fifteen year struggle that had to be waged to get recognition for the Punjabi language and the setting up of a linguistic State; the demand to start work on Khera dam without attaching conditionalities, the resentment against Delhi being closed during the Asian Games of 1982 to Sikhs entering the

Capital by bus, train or car.

Between those grievances are memories of a history of independent Sikh identity, based on Maharajah Ranjit Singh's empire which continued to exist until 1947. Even then, the British were only too willing to create another partitioned state but Sikh leaders stood by India. Memories of fighting India's invaders from the Mughals to the British, of the painful truncation of roots from West Punjab during 1947; memories of the great army Generals Sikhs have given India, including Kulwant Singh, Harbaksh Singh and Jagjit Singh Arora; memories of the sacrifices Sikh volunteers made in the name of violence and non-violence -- all these add fuel to a simmering fire of discontentment.

At Naoshera Doaba, Sudershan picks up the gauntlet thrown by the opposition camp led by Bhim Lal Whig. He identifies Punjab's weakness in their ill-preparedness to counter the "threatening disease of domination" (279). The resentment against majority domination simmers close to the surface:

...when we cry for Hindu-Sikh unity, some Punjabi Hindu spokesman like Whig Sahib here will reply that unity can be obtained only if we submit. They committed the original sin of repudiating their mother-tongue and of introducing religion into the politics of independent India. When we cry for brotherhood, unity and equality they offer slavery and death. (280)

The contrived alienation of Sikhs from the levers of administrative and political power in the State creates an absence of dignity. All this is attributed to Hindu-Sikh hostility seen as an epidemic of virus infection.

There are very fundamental distinctions between the two faiths which cannot be bridged by occasional intermarriages among neighbouring Hindus and Sikhs. Whig Sahib's son was married to a good Sikh girl, the niece of Sardar Satinder Singh Chahal. Does that mean that he feels kindly towards the Sikhs? Not at all; you have read his paper. This virus will continue to flare up until the identity of Sikhs is completely accepted by the Hindus and their allies. It is then that the instinct of survival and self-preservation will subside among the Sikhs.(280)

The hypocrisy of the State when it suddenly awakens to sociological realities is also attacked. The controversy over armed Sikhs inside the precincts of Amritsar's Golden Temple is explained with a reference to Guru Tegh Bahadur's miripiri, the temporal and spiritual swords. As Sudershan rallies:

We love weapons. For us they symbolise self-respect and self-defence. They form part of our religion. When the country needs us during external conflicts, nobody criticises us then for carrying arms. Now we carry them to describe our dignity. (281)

The communist Dr. Sripal places Sikh political and economic grievances in perspective against the background of the whole of India. He dismisses the fruitfulness of individual/group aggressiveness and points out that Punjab's econom-

ic grievances, though justified are similar to those of most other Indian States. The political leadership in Punjab, as in other Indian states, demanded autonomy in agriculture price control; demanded more mills, exclusive rights to rivers and autonomy to sell excess hydro-power to neighbouring states.

These demands are symptomatic of a new wave sweeping India, wherein states, divided on a linguistic basis, were seeing themselves as isolates on the sub-continent rather than as complements to a larger national identity. These are the dangers of communalisation of politics, and in Yatra, Dr. Sripal is the only one asking people to keep religion and politics separate, to make religion a personal matter only, and to not allow places of worship to be used for political purposes.

In the plot line itself, Nina Sibal makes an interesting and continuous distinction. In tracing Sikh history, Krishna Chahal's direct patrilineal ancestors are all Sikh, whereas the affinal relationships she makes and the differences she has are all with non-Sikhs. For instance, Krishna's husband whom she later divorces, belongs to an Arya Samajist family; Ranjit Dhawan is a Hindu; the only newspaper proprietor (here, of the Punjabi Tej) who denounces Sikhs continuously in the novel is Krishna's fame-

hungry father-in-law, Bhim Lal Whig; again, Chaman Bajaj, Malik, Father Sherifis are all non-Sikhs. As a narrative device, this distinction allows for the setting up of contemporary paradigms such as Hindu-Sikh hostility in order to test the elasticity of the framework. Every variable in this paradigm is either evolved from or is directly linked to the generations of the Chahal family.

Notes:

1. Nina Sibal, Yatra (1987. London: Women's Press Limited; New Delhi: Roli Books Pvt. Ltd., 1988), p.269.
2. Hereafter, in this Chapter, quotes with page numbers given in brackets will refer to the text of Yatra.
3. Khushwant Singh, A History of the Sikhs: Volume 2: 1839- 1964 (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1966), p.278.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., p.267.

CHAPTER IV

THE TROTTER-NAMA

The thing in itself is nothing, a cipher. You supply the figure.... You see before you, beside you, a reconstructed Trotter.

- The Trotter-Nama¹

The Trotter-Nama, the chronicle of the House of Trotters, uses the framework of the family saga to explore the relation between fiction, history and (auto)-biography, as also the space the Anglo-Indian community enjoys and has enjoyed through seven generations, both in relation to the different European groups which have sought to colonise India and to indigenous Indians.

There is a randomness to the creation of this chronicle which is testified and ironically blown into antic proportions by the elaborations that accompany every description, event, locale and person. The seemingly hallowed purpose of the chronicle is to trace the ancestry of the present Trotter, namely, Eugene Aloysius Trotter, back to seven generations. The novel builds this into a hyperbolic hymnal by evoking at the start the legendary 'namas' of Indian history. Such adulation and sanctity reserved for the creations of a revered past is dissipated by a wry expansiveness. Hence, of the Trotter-Nama or the Epic of the Trotters or

simply the Trotter-Book, Alan Sealy writes: "Never quite worked out what *nama* means, but book is good enough. Means "name" in Hindi, but that's not the same thing" (The Trotter-Nama, 6).² The gravity of the *namas* which include Abu Fazl's Akbar-Nama, Firdausi's Shah-Nama and Babar's Babar-Nama is calculatedly diluted not only by the flippant addition to the list of the medieval recipe book called Ni'mat-Nama and the Book of the endlessly talking Parrot called the Tota-Nama but also by the gentle disparagement which accompanies them. By denying the sacredness of the works, the author facilitates an honest reading of the *nama* while implying the parameters for his own creation. Thus the *namas* are hardly privileged for their historic truths or their generic wisdom. Instead they are appreciated for their colourfulness, for capturing "all sorts of interesting odds" (7), in fact, for the trivia that they ennoble. This trivia, however, is composed of more than baubles. It is composed of prodigal illustrations but travels in a brown paper bag. It is not history but a 'chronicle' whereby it authenticates the inclusion of fictional experience. Its prime mover is "the garnering of the past" and therefore, is rooted in the present as a "paper chase" (7). "Because", as Sealy explains,

we came from all over, not just England, and went all over, not just to England. Someone's got to do it, or it'll all blow away like half those old chronicles that came apart and were sold page by

page, so that when you ask for them in any of the world's libraries your request slip comes back stamped, in violet, UNBOUND. And so we forget. Past masters in the art of forgetting, my people.(7)

Trotter's concern with names and with `his' people grows out of his unsureness of social identity. "My people! I could have laughed up a storm when the words first struck me"(7) he writes in the Prologue. The Home of the Trotters has a French name - Sans Souci. The Great Trotter traces a French ancestry from a Jean Petitot whose son changed his name to Trottoire to avoid religious persecution in Geneva, while the Great Trotter in his turn, in order to make his way between the fortunes of war pragmatically deserted the French army and his French name and instead joined the East India Company's Bengal Army as Justin Aloysius Trotter. It is of the worthy line established by this Frenchman-turned-Englishman that Eugene in the Prologue writes "Trotters, Anglos, same thing".(7) Thus the Trotter family and its Anglo-Indian character is a pure fictional construct created to suit the exigencies of the moment. It amalgamates French and British legacies so that Trotter is recast primarily as an European. From a `firangi' refugee who filled the European nation-state's need for soldiers in their war with India, and who like many real life European riff-raff of the eighteenth century, opted to stay on in India, Trotter found himself going up the social mobility ladder in Indian socie-

ty by virtue of his European ancestry and his abilities as a gunner extraordinary. Trotter's transformation from Frenchman to Anglo speaks of an easy accommodation process. A closer look gives a slightly different social picture. In Lucknow or Nakhilau where Trotter settles, he seems to be the only Anglo around. Except for an occasional visit by a General of the East India Company, Trotter is hardly shown socialising with any European. He is virtually an isolated, self-styled Anglo keen on living life to the lees. His isolation is compensated by a certain iconoclasm and an innate creativity. The generations which follow find themselves being measured against the Great Trotter's iconoclasm. Though the future Trotters hold on to the name Justin left them, in its capacity to signify direct descent, 'Trotter' becomes a mere fetish, because after the fifth generation, the Trotters are hardly blue-blooded. Thus, the family line is robbed of its direct genealogical continuity and the narrative breaks one of the enduring characteristics of a family. Methodologically too, this is a subversive technique followed throughout the novel where a category or circumstance or definition is assumed or suggested and the narrative promptly goes on to falsify it. The novel, therefore, in assembling seven generations under the name of Trotter, offers at this point a metafictional comment.

Of the eight generations of Trotters, the protagonist of each generation is associated with a way of life that is also a metaphor. Thus, Justin Trotter is a Legend while Mik (Next Trotter) embodies Chivalry; Charles (A-Trotter) symbolises Romance and Thomas Henry (Middle Trotter) is all Prose. These four generations are followed by an elision -- the only one of its kind in the chronicle -- over the next Trotter, Victoria, who is the first woman in direct descentance and the only one associated with History, due to her husband being a historian. The narrative conveniently labels this generation as "void". The antipathy to History, in the narrator's case, is best sampled in his flaring aversion for Victoria's husband, Mr. Montagu. Montagu's fledgling biography of Justin is vituperatively dismissed by Eugene as an "academic dockyard fantasy" (113), and his prejudice pours out in torrents:

Tissue of lies! Transparent concoction! Mr. Montagu, let posterity note, was a man of the wick, with an appetite for travel never requited. A man, can we doubt, cosseted by his father and thrashed by his mother. A dried-up quill of a man with a sharp nose and a measurable imagination. An historian. (113)

Yet, falsification is actually Eugene's profession: his forgery of minitatures; his tourist guide rigmaroles for people who want to hear stories about places; in fact, the entire Trotter-Nama that he authors. In his own words in the Epilogue: "Tell you the truth I made up the whole line

-- I mean joining up all those Trotters like that. Funny bloody story, more holes than a cheese in it" (572). Something of this strange, isolated so-called Anglo fantasy is communicated to the reader through Jonquil. Jonquil has come to India to do a story on the Anglo-Indian remnant. He has been to Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, the Kolar Gold Fields, Bangalore, Clement Town but not to Sans Souci, because Sans Souci bears "a strange sad monadic people.... They live in a kind of bubble -- or many bubbles. They speak a kind of English.... They fantasize about the past. They improvise grand pedigrees. It's like a Raj novel gone wrong." (560)

The inference from these two confessions weighs heavily in favour of treating The Trotter-Nama as an elaborate parody of the family-saga genre. Neither history nor biography tells the truth of its contents. The only surety is the narrator and the narratee and the ameliorative text that almost got away with regularising the imagined as private history. To continue with the linking of Trotter generations to literary forms, the generation following Victoria, that of Peter Augustine (Lapsed Trotter) is symbolised as Decadence; the next, Eustace's (Fore-Trotter) is labelled Diaspora and the last, that of Eugene (Chosen Trotter) is highlighted as New Promise.

This New Promise is nowhere more evident than in the meanderings of the narrative itself. One of the earliest

prognostications of what is to come can be seen in the adaptation of a common nursery rhyme, at the start of the chronicle proper, to suit the landscape of Sans Souci and Trotter history. Eugene is Agent-and-guide even in his writing profession for it is his voice as Narrator that guides the reader through the 575 pages of the chronicle. The accompanying voice is the narratee's, i.e. the Cup-Bearer's. The narrative is dotted with their frequent stylised exchange of questions-and-answers which breathe of an exotic fantasy world. Like Zeus and Ganymede, Eugene and the Cup-Bearer are masters of the chronicled world they survey, and both, the wine they drink and the winged harbingers they call upon create the impression of an expansive, varied and unbelievable landscape.

The Cup-Bearer matches his narrator in elaborate gestures, telling witticisms and is often the check on the narrator's flights into fancy and his flow into words. In fact, the anarchic principle in The Trotter Nama is Eugene's facility for words -- sprawling and seemingly shapeless. Like any Indian teller of oral narrative, the narrator takes the liberty to deviate into a wide array of asides. These may be ruminations on lexicographic entries, native fauna and flora, pieces of geography, extraneous commentaries, recipes for unheard of concoctions, interpolations in the form of apologies or letters of resignation, descriptions of

frontispieces, inventions and discoveries. Between such intelligences, farce is reserved as a subversive frame of reference. In one such instance, Eugene, the Zeus of the chronicle, is named by a dentist's daughter as Lenten Trotter, with Lenten standing for 'corpu-lent', 'flatu-lent' and 'indo-lent'. The narrator's helplessness in controlling his flow of words is best evidenced in his determined detailing of the Grand Nala gutter as seen by Justin in his fall from his hot-air balloon, S lamndre. An alert and concerned Cup-Bearer has to break forcibly into the narrator's choking reverie:

. . . .

-- Narrator --

. . . .

-- Narrator! --

. . . .

Narrator, do you hear me? Your eyes are rolling! --

. . . .

Enough, Narrator.

What is it, Cup-Bearer? Where am I?

It's past, Narrator, there now, there now. Here is a little rice wine from Japan. It will calm you.

O my sweet Ganymede! For a moment I thought I was -- no it is too horrible ...

Then leave it. Let us go on. (38-39)

At another point in the narrative, set in the eighteenth century, on the night of Justin's fall to death, the Narrator is a stalker, jumping a two-century time barrier backwards. The power of the Narrator to intrude into the past and turn autodiegetic there such that a character in 1799 senses his presence, speaks of an enabling fantasy:

Who stalls the baker tonight, Narrator?

. . . .

Witless Cup-Bearer! Who but the Seventh Trotter?
I cast no shadow. I am the light. I can come up
close, squawk at his shoulder, make him jump,
knock him about the ribs and run off. (107)

Eugene's concern with the miniature (like Jane Austen's emphasis on detailing two inches of ivory) has led him to detailed examination of this almost insignificant thread of Anglos in Indian society. The history of India as it involved the Anglos; the economic and political hijacking of the community; its final helplessness at its own insignificance and the final choice of emigration for large chunks of the community all find a place in The Trotter-Nama.

In the section in which Sealy introduces literary echoes, there is The Waste Land kind of an accumulative echo reiteration which draws upon two landmarks of an earlier literary tradition -- that of T.S. Eliot's The Waste Land

(1922) and E.M. Forster's A Passage to India (1924). In The Waste Land, the "DA" offers a redeeming wisdom from the Upanishads for a land laid sterile. Forster's novel is often cited as the classic Anglo-Indian text (here Anglo-Indian means Englishmen writing about India). In A Passage To India the repeated "boum" echo from the Marabar Caves is an objective correlative for Mrs. Moore's 'crisis of faith' and Adela Quested's 'crisis of conduct'.³ Her experiences of India and her terror of the echoes in the cave muddle rather than enlighten Mrs. Moore towards the spiritual reinforcement she is looking for. Similarly, the echoes which confuse Adela are an objectification of her own inner confusion regarding her instincts and desires. Such weighty metaphysical implications which the "boum" echoes in A Passage to India emphasise are parodied outright in The Trotter-Nama. Here, Sealy uses the literary echo from Forster to emphasize the withdrawal that the Anglo-Indians in Sans Souci were making in dread of India being granted independence. The numerous Trotters make preparations to leave the country, since according to their reasoning, with the going of the British all India becomes a waste land. The Trotters' steel trunks are taken out for packing and the echoes made in the progress of packing include the "bou-oum" (reduced to a noise accompanying trunks pulled out of storage), the "DA" (reduced to the sound of trunk lids swinging open) and a "--nya" which we recall is an echo emanating

from The Trotter-Nama itself (and here explained as the creaking of hinges). Thus Sealy parodies the traditions inherited by his novel and in doing so has fun with the modern theory of intertextuality.

The Trotter-Nama also shows a sustained instinct for self-preservation which is reflected in the Seventh Trotter's unpublicised profession -- that of forging the ancient, forgotten and accidentally rediscovered Kirani paintings lodged in Sans Souci. Eugene smugly pontificates,

What's the first thing you do when you find a cache of old miniatures? Hide them? Hoard them? Burn them? Frame them? Display them? Sell them? Wrong. First you copy them. Then you can do all those other things and still have your cake sitting there. Twice as much is twice as good. (526)

In the Narrator-narratee exchange that follows soon after the above passage, emphasis is on adulteration seeping into almost everything in India. In keeping with this trend, Eugene, the Narrator, convincingly adulterates the genuine Kirani paintings and transforms them into miniatures with changes such that none would be traced back to the original. By producing imitation copies Eugene is extending to art a process paralleled in his own life, in his random piecing together of the Trotter genealogical line and in his writing of The Trotter-Nama itself. In each instance the urge to authenticate, to raise from a "bubble" status (in Jonquil's

words) is the key factor instrumental in patterning Eugene's priorities. With the revelation that he is himself Eugene Das and not Eugene Trotter, paranoia complements his tendency to compulsive imitation, and The Trotter-Nama, which is ideally meant to be a book about a name, retells the Trotter genealogy as a paradox of the nameless searching for a name.

Notes:

1. I. Allan Sealy, The Trotter-Nama: A Chronicle (1988. New York: Albert A. Knopf Inc.; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1988), p.10.
2. Hereafter, in this Chapter, quotes with page numbers given in brackets will refer to the text of The Trotter-Nama.
3. John Sayre Martin, E.M. Forster: The Endless Journey (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1976), p.151.

CHAPTER V

THE MEMORY OF ELEPHANTS

...she and other members of my family, dead and alive, seemed more like characters in set pieces constructed by the Ghost of Christmas Past, and I an ever unlikely, increasingly curious, increasingly penitent, Ebenezer Scrooge.

- The Memory of Elephants¹

Boman Desai's The Memory of Elephants records in the format of a family saga, a rare insight into one of India's smallest and most well-knit communities -- the Parsis. The novel develops from a point in the present to three generations backwards into the Seervai and Cama families and then jumps further backwards to the historical time of the Arab invasion of Persia in seventh century A.D. The awareness of history and tradition, the instinct and impact of survivors in history, the adjustments to demands that exposure to new lands and cultures imposes, and the fresh perspective needed to inject the present with ebullience, are some of the concerns this novel deals with.

The Parsis are a unique community in India in many ways. Unlike the Sikhs, Muslims or Anglo-Indians who, however distinctive from each other and from the Hindus, have sometimes intermarried and have overlapped with each other in terms of culture, cuisine and ethos, the Parsis to this day remain strictly endogamous and culturally autono-

mous though economically integrated into the mainstream of Indian life. The community does not accept converts either, but in the rare case of a Parsi male marrying outside the community or having children out of wedlock, he may raise his children as Parsis, since within India one is Parsi by birth, the identity being derived through the male line.² Willard G. Oxtoby notes that

Priests who have been willing to perform initiation ceremonies for adopted children and children of mixed marriages have been subjected to censure by governing boards of the community's institutions in Navsari and Bombay. The pattern for twentieth-century India was decided by the civil courts in a 1909 case seeking the exclusion of a non-Parsi wife from fire temples and community institutions. In that decision, and again in 1925, the courts upheld the community's restriction of its properties to the children of Parsis.³

Such overt enforcement of strict endogamous marriages have enabled the Parsis to create a family network of their entire community. Indeed, Homi Seervai, the narrator in The Memory of Elephants tells us that, in his Bapaiji's (paternal grandmother) home in Navsari, they had photographs of "all our relatives (which meant all the Parsis in Navsari...)"(29)⁴ and goes on to elaborate that "all the Parsis in Navsari have photographs on their walls of all the Parsis in Navsari"(29).

The Memory of Elephants achieves the jump into collective memory and the collective unconscious through a novel

device which has a science fiction logic and is therefore without the magical elements of Midnight's Children and Yatra or the deliberate twisted fantasy of The Trotter-Nama. Homi, the quadriplegic science prodigy has, in the University of Aquihana in America, invented a memoscan, which allows its user to skip from conscious memory to what Bapaiji calls the "Memory of the Soul" (32), i.e. the collective unconscious. It was "a way to control the past" (321) by replaying over and over in the mind any desired point in time-past. Though Homi's first use of it is to self-destructively console himself over a break-up with Candace, he gradually realizes that he has been granted "the power to probe the memory of elephants, to learn the password of whales, to discover no less than the equation to the universe which Einstein had sought" (321), in fact to be master of what he chose to see. However, before this realization actually works a recuperation of body and soul in Homi, he, due to his experiments with the memoscan, is put in touch with three generations of his family, patrilineally and matrilineally. In Homi's case there occur no confusions of genealogy as happens in the three novels discussed earlier. Instead, clarification of that which went unexplained in actual life on earth and insights into the psychology and thinking of Homi's closest relatives are brought home to him in a series of tableaux.

The contact from the world of the dead, facilitated by the memoscan, is made for a very specific reason: to teach Homi, who was willing to die for an unworthy love, "what it means to be a bawaji."(1) Homi's illness affords an opportunity to an array of his family members to help him get into contact with the social and historical roots of his community so that he sees the intricacies of his tradition and lifts his mind to higher planes of achievement.

The novel offers a true rendition of the social and historical facts of the Parsi community. Their historical moorings were originally in Persia -- present day Iran. They had jealously safeguarded their religious and cultural practices, but in the seventh century, had been subject to persecution for those same reasons by the messianic zeal of the then newly established religion called Islam. The Arabs under Caliph Omar had routed the Zoroastrians under the boy-king Yezdigard III, grandson of the Great King, Khushrow II, Shahanshah eran-ud-aneran. It was in the year of Yezdigard III's ascension to the throne of Persia, i.e. in 632 A.D. that the Prophet had died. Before the fanatic zeal of Muslim invaders, Yezdigard III lost all the crucial battles including the battle of Kadesia (which is noted as the beginning of the end of the Persian empire and of the four-century rule of the Sasanian dynasty), the battle of Jalula in 637 A.D. and the battle of Nihavand in 642 A.D. Thus had

been brought to an end, one of the wealthiest, most tolerant and most powerful empires of early human history in the Middle East.

The Memory of Elephants uses public history to debate private loyalties and priorities amongst the vanquished, fleeing Parsis. This is represented in following the flight and musings of a family from the Fars province (from which the word 'Parsi' is derived). Bahman is unable to save his father though he saves his mother and wounded younger brother from the swords of the conquering Arabs. His restlessness to avenge and the necessity to survive in order to carry out his vengeance leads him to a different philosophy of life. Even as fugitives, the Parsi mother looks to her sons to fulfil the regenerative purpose for which she believes Ahura Mazda has created the world and them. Of her younger son, Xerxes, she says, "When he is a man he will till the ground, he will make things grow"(16).

Bahman's perplexity regarding his mother's words as he stands as a fugitive at the crossroads of life, parallels Homi's bafflement regarding Candace and his unrequited love. Bahman's becomes a legendary perplexity which passes into myth but Homi's, by a turn of fortune, reactivates the collective unconscious of the Parsis right from the accumulated experience of Bahman so that he is able to understand

the paradox of life -- an understanding denied to Bahman thirteen centuries earlier. That Homi had finally got hold of the purpose of this experience comes through in his exultation in the final pages of the novel: "I had done it; I had brought them all together in one place at one time, made a whole of all the scattered pieces" (322).

According to the novel, the Parsi culture is set apart from the Musalman's by virtue of the former's tolerance and humanity. Where the Musalman exterminates in the name of Allah, the Parsis had vanquished but let the conquered live honourably. Where the Musalman was intolerant of other faiths, the Parsis had tolerated with equanimity Judaism, Christianity and paganism within their empire. Hence, when Bahman's mother fears for the psychological integrity of her son (just as Bapaiji would in Homi's case) she articulates it thus:

I do not know my son.... He is like a wild animal who has had its first taste of blood. There will never be enough blood for him. He will kill the Musalman only to become the Musalman himself. I am afraid of my own son (16).

Bahman's argument that aggression was their best defence, is met with depreciation:

First, it is sweet, yes, revenge; but then it begins to justify all forms of corruption -- mutilation, murder, assassination; it becomes your master, and you become your own enemy. There is more honour in death than in such a life. How can

I make you see this thing?(16)

The lack of means to let her son peep into the wisdom of her people stumps the mother. (In the twentieth century, however, Homi jumps the problem by inventing the memoscan. Besides, liberties with fictional introduction can be made in private history such as Homi's, whereas in the case of Bahman, whose private history was passing into legend, any irregularity would have robbed the tale of its authenticity). Bahman reasons that his anger went into his sword while his mother's went into fear, helplessness and resentment. Even his mother understands him for a brief moment when he returns with brother Xerxes's body - killed by Arabs but avenged by Bahman on the deserts of Hormuz.

Xerxes himself, before death, understood that they belonged to an era of war when "things happened quickly; answers were scarce; [and] blind actions such as Bahman's kept them one step ahead of the Musalman" (20). The mother, however, dismisses killing as a universal atavistic instinct. "Everyone kills for God." "This is the blindness that destroys the world" (20). The blindness embraces both Parsi and Musalman. The lesson the Prologue is pushing through, therefore, is of the courage and dignity with which to meet life; when even the lamb can turn lion, as Xerxes proved in meeting his end courageously though all alone. Thirteen centuries later in a vastly changed landscape, on a

different continent altogether to which most of "the original, the pure Persians" (13) had migrated (i.e. in Bombay, India) -- the descendants of the survivors of Hormuz were concerned with a similar project: to infuse an orientation towards life in a quadriplegic boy and make him feel worthy of the mantle of a bawaji.

The revelations that Homi's grand-parents and parents make to him trace the roots Parsis struck out in India and the evolution of their cultural and social life thereafter. The Parsi family becomes a symbolic denominator -- a powerful repository of cultural knowledge. The indigenisation of Parsis is given an example in Bapaiji's knowing only Gujarati unlike her grandsons who knew only English. The exposure to British colonisers made many Parsis copy English customs, even as the upcoming generations such as Homi and Rusi would seek American styles to emulate. Granny (Homi's maternal grandmother) called this, a "pilgrimage toward all things Anglo" (102). Both Adi and Soli mama have a college education from England . Granny is comfortable most in Cambridge and even on her return to India seeks the Club and British friends in Calcutta. Adi's education abroad made "all Indian girls seem so provincial" (196) and one of the reasons he marries Pheroza is that she, having been educated in a convent, spoke English as well as any English girl and besides, had taken a degree in English Literature as part of

the first set of women graduates from Sophia College in Bombay. The gulf between their British ways and Indian nationality comes across strongly when Pheroza recalls the investiture of the first Indian as Governor in 1947:

...the first Indian Governor to be, was late, an unheard of occurrence during the British Raj. Finally, some sadhus, wearing dhotis and smeared with saffron from the waist up, took their places onstage and performed puja, preparing the way for Mr. Pakvasa, who made his appearance shortly in a kurta, dhoti, and Nehru cap. To you this might seem commonplace, but to us, accustomed to the British ways, this had all the magnificence of a comic strip. (217)

This penchant for things English grows into a broader Westernisation in Rusi and Homi's times. Their speech and ways of expression are filled with Americanisms. Bapaiji's in-laws remind Homi of a Mother Goose rhyme; the Gujarati newspaper Jam-e-Jamshed is cherished by Homi only for its English features such as Ripley's Believe It or Not, comic strips of Dagwood and Blondie, The Phantom and Mandrake the Magician; he prefers Western popular music to Indian classical; has an overflowing bookshelf with Perry Masons, Tarzan, Agatha Christies and English classics but without a single book which is even vaguely Indian; besides, the pictures in his room (be it film-stars or scientists) were all of foreigners: from Sophia Loren to Jonas Salk and Albert Sabin. Similarly, Rusi too is so self-expressive in an American-hippie way that his concerned parents march him off to a

psychiatrist..

However, both Rusi and Homi are fish out of water in an actual American environment. The real America is intrusive, not a culture into which either of them settle easily. Rusi meets such a situation when Jan accuses him of interfering with the American process:

...I just don't like foreigners coming here and interfering with the American process. If workers go on strike you can be damn sure it is because they're getting ripped off by some fat cat complex or the other, and people like you don't make it any easier for them (264).

Rusi's rejoinder signifies how lost he is:

Yes, yes, yes, and how am I supposed to know this? For you I am just a foreigner, something to occupy your free time to make you feel important, something to talk about when you go back to your own kind. For me, what a country this is -- everybody is a foreigner! Even their names are like from novels, Maureen and Tim and Diane and Jan.... (264)

Rusi's discomfort stems from a culture jump: America was as highly individualised as India was oriented to the collective.

Rusi despaired of understanding Americans. They appeared to use a kind of shorthand among themselves; even when he understood the words something was lost in the reverberations. He hesitated to speak too directly because he felt himself too easily misunderstood, too easily drawn into explanations that would have been unnecessary in

Bombay. He developed a phrase for the way he felt
- ethnic anxiety (262-3).

This feeling of "ethnic anxiety" is not unique to Rusi. Homi is caught by it too, when, like Rusi, the cross-cultural understanding he gives is not reciprocated by the Americans -- neither by Candace who frolics with him as an "exotic" nor by Julie who claims to love him but cannot understand why he refuses to be transformed from heathen (i.e. non-Christian) to Christian. The encounter offers a framework to analyse the place of religion in moulding identities of people and their cultures. The history of the Parsi community in India is characterized by contact with other religious traditions (Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, Sikhism) and with forms of modern spiritualism such as theosophy and astrology.⁵ Zoroastrianism teaches Manasni, Gavasni, Kunasni, meaning good thoughts, good words, good deeds. Homi's childhood was spent in India and his experience is of a secular state with equal importance given to all religions, of a fundamental right to equality (whatever the religion or caste of the citizen) enshrined in the Constitution; of closely spaced temples, churches, gurudwaras and mosques and of a widely varied, culturally and religiously differentiated people living vibrantly together. This is not to say that prejudicial undercurrents are absent in India. Rather, India is a fluid mosaic and sociological readings suggest she is a closed society making occasional

attempts at overcoming religious and cultural shortsightedness. However, in America, a country known for high educational standards, individualism and The Rights of Man, and of which Homi says, "It is everybody's dream to come to America", and in Pennsylvania where even dashboards of cars announce 'Honk If You Love Jesus', and 'Jesus Saves', it is inconceivable to find religious intolerance pervading individual lives. Yet, Julie is unconvinced by the ethics behind Zoroastrianism: "It doesn't mean a thing what you do... if you don't believe in Jesus" is her argument, and Homi's rejoinder that he believes in others besides Jesus makes her reject him forever.

Though Homi is not a devout Zoroastrian, he believes in God and in a philosophy of tolerance. He has a fond recollection of Parsi initiation and religious festivities in which he and Rusi had taken part, such as their navjotes; of the *agiaries* or fire temples and even of the towers of silence called *dakhmas*. Even the Parsis' traditional mode of disposing their dead is aimed at protecting earth, water and air from the defilement that other modes would entail, and at emphasising the egalitarian nature of the community. After his expansive childhood, Homi finds America a cultural straightjacket. Rusi's experience is almost similar and the marriage he makes, significantly, is with a girl who is herself an immigrant to America and a descendant of German

Jews. Jan sums up their experience and the lessons learnt from a culture-shock in America when she says, "biculturalism is the best thing because it armours you from the abuses of patriotism: nationalism, insularity, myopia" (268). If not for this, there would be no difference between her and the fanatic 'Musalmans' of the seventh century. For a child of this union which would be matrilineally Jewish and patrilineally Zoroastrian, Rusi and Jan decide "no bar mitzvah for the child and no navjote, only love and a good education, and the rest will take care of itself" (269).

This resolution of religious and cultural plurality in an alien land also shows a break with the endogamy patterns of Parsi life. This is in contrast with the behaviour of Bapaiji's and even Sohrab Uncle's generations. Sohrab Uncle had come down to India from Hong Kong looking for a Parsi wife and had still been in Bombay six years later, unmarried. Bapaiji talks of class differences which cause a rift between her childhood sweetheart and herself. They, the Ghadialis, were of the priestly class whereas Bapaiji's family, the Dhondis were much lower down the Parsi hierarchy. Even Hormusji Behramji Seervai who marries Bapaiji, does so only because his first wife had had a baby by someone else and after the annulment of that marriage, none else would marry him. The Seervais also belonged to the priestly class and were much richer than the Ghadialis

and they were also high above the Dhondis socially, so that Bapaiji is prompted to ask Homi: "You don't think a Seervai would marry a Dhondi unless there was something wrong with him, did you?" (48).

Similarly, class was extended to inanimate objects too. For instance, the sitar was called the "servant's instrument" (102) while good Parsis played only the piano or the violin.

The legendary quality about the Parsis is their industrious nature. "What was lost [in Persia] by the sword was won back [in India] by the sickle".(48) Parsis were very often rewarded with land for their industry, as was Homi's ancestor, Temurji Rustamji Seervai, in 1714 by Aurangzeb. Their wealth led to exclusivity and for six generations thence they had married only their first cousins until the marriage of Bapaiji and Hormusji Seervai.

History records that the Parsis' emergence as a prosperous and influential community was closely related to the growth of Bombay as a metropolitan centre under the British. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Parsis from Gujarat settled in Bombay, learnt English, became business entrepreneurs and educated professionals. Even before that, towards the end of the fifteenth century, Zoroastrian ideas had been incorporated in the syncretic

religious reform, described as a new religion -- Din-i-ilahi, carried out by the Mughal emperor, Akbar.

Besides, since the 1880s many Parsis were involved through the Indian National Congress in the struggle for India's Independence. Well-known leaders included Dadabhai Naoroji, Pherozeshah Mehta and Dinshaw Wacha. It has been said of them that they "put national identity before communal identity."⁶ Moreover, The Memory of Elephants tells us of Homi's Mom's great-uncle, Jalbhai Pherozshah Cama, "the industrialist, capitalist, and philanthropist, who was in all the history books" (66) and of his sister, Tehmina Cama, who "had started the movement for the emancipation of women in Navsari." (66) Thus, in Oxtoby's words, Parsis "had an economic and cultural influence out of all proportion to their numbers, an influence... [which] reached its peak before World War I."⁷ Further, after Independence in 1947, the Indian government promulgated the policy of secularization which forced former exclusively Parsi firms to hire non-Parsis, resulting in a greater incorporation of and exposure to India's diverse peoples and their cultures.

In The Memory of Elephants time is spanned not in years but in jumps, with births, inventions and socially significant milestones marking the turns of years. Thus, Bapaiji's recollections of changes and the importance they had had in

her life is dated by her memories of the coming of the railways (for a job in which she had desired to groom her son), the first electric lights, the first motor cars, the first aeroplanes and also for the first time in her life -- inflation. Each of these marks time historically, placing Bapaiji's recollections in the early and mid-nineteenth century, though in the novel, their significance is laid out culturally.

It is interesting to see The Memory of Elephants, composed of jostling voices which pervade Homi's collective and "genetic memory"(232), blend the legends surrounding the Parsi migration to India into the narrative. Though the novel claims the Parsis to have undertaken a single migration by sea, Oxtoby notes that "Muslim travellers in tenth-century mention various parts of India as inhabited by *gabrs*, a derogatory term for Zoroastrians. Enough of these locations are in inland North India to suggest an overland migration pattern."⁸ The legends that The Memory of Elephants takes up are actually found in the Kisseh-e-Sanjan (Story of Sanjan), a narrative in four hundred lines of Persian verse, composed in 1600 by a priest, Bahman son of Kaikobad. Only the legend about the pitcher filled to the brim with milk is not taken from the Kisseh-e-Sanjan, though that legend too has its place in the Parsi tradition.

Amidst all this and operating as a medium, stands Homi

as an Ebenezer Scrooge, for whose physical and mental recuperation personal histories spanning centuries have been recalled from the collective unconscious and patterned engagingly as a family saga.

Notes:

1. Boman Desai, The Memory of Elephants (1988. Andre Deutsch; New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1992), p.98.
2. Willard G. Oxtoby, 'Parsis', The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol.11, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), p.199.
3. ibid., pp.200-201.
4. Hereafter, in this Chapter, quotes with page numbers given in brackets will refer to the text of The Memory of Elephants.
5. Gherardo Gnoli, 'Zoroastrianism', trans. from Italian by Ughetta Fitzgerald Lubin, The Encyclopedia of Religion, Vol.15, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Pub. Co., 1987), p.589.
6. Oxtoby, op. cit., p.200.
7. ibid.
8. ibid., p.199.

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION

The inference from the readings done of Midnight's Children, Yatra, The Trotter-Nama and The Memory of Elephants in the four preceding chapters firmly establishes the family saga as a viable literary sub-genre which, in keeping with the multiplicity of contemporary issues, the depth of their historical antecedents and the breadth of their impact, affords a kaleidoscopic configurational sweep temporally and spatially. The family saga is perhaps the only form where simultaneously the individual and the collective are generically superimposed. It proves a flexible literary form, capable of accommodating vastly varied issues and narrative modes. Thus in Midnight's Children, the family saga is the apt format for a sustained interrogation of the possibility of pure, unmixed cultural and traditional inheritances in a social system; in Yatra the family saga re-creates a derivative heroism that belongs to the Sikhs of legend; in The Trotter-Nama, the family saga subscribes to an outright parody which dovetails into a private fantasy of enormous proportions; and in The Memory of Elephants, the family saga is a means to detail the social, cultural and religious history of the Parsis, from the time they were in Iran, through their move to India to the recent migration of some to U.S.A.

Each of the sagas in explicating a strand of India's social mosaic, together enjoin a definitive acknowledgement of primary cultural characteristics acquired after centuries of acculturation. The space for plurality in India's palimpsestic culture is suggested by the fact that though the Parsis arrived as fugitives in India soon after the seventh century, the Muslims were conquerors following the Arab conquest of Sind in 711 A.D., the Sikhs broke away as a protest against Hindu and Islamic orthodoxy in the sixteenth century and the Anglo-Indians evolved as a cross-cultural by-product since the seventeenth century, none of these peoples were successfully forced into complete assimilation with the numerically superior Hindu culture. This could be a result of India's vast geography, her numerous Princely States and their negotiations for political one-upmanship, making it very difficult for uniform religious and cultural laws to be promulgated and effectively maintained. Further, the Vedas and the Shastras do not encourage fanatic hatred towards other religions and hence, pockets of new religions had been allowed to co-exist on Indian soil, even while India withstood or sat out invasions and centuries of foreign rule.

All four novels highlight the hybrid backdrop against which their particular religious or ethnic specificity is

constituted. Midnight's Children is a celebration of India's plenitude -- her plurality, multiplicity of alternatives and co-existence of diversity (as embodied in Saleem). This is pitted against binariness (represented by Shiva) that threatens to destroy it. That the narrator Saleem should be Muslim is a strategic device, because a minority can belong centrally to this plural culture as much as any one else. At the same time, there is also in this novel an acute consciousness of the fragility of this concept of the inclusive and plural India. Saleem's three mothers -- natural (Vanitha), adoptive (Amina) and nutrient (Mary) can be seen as an ironic play on the Indian government's official propaganda for national integration which is captured in popular films as the Amar-Akbar-Anthony combination. The trope reiterates integration to mean the survival of minorities as specific strands, in harmony, in equality and as complement to the larger whole. Integration of a cultural kind has been continuously taking place in India for a long time, but Midnight's Children also anticipated the dangerous possibility that ethnic and religious destabilisation may be triggered by India's sprawling and inefficient political apparatus.

Yatra's concerns, though similar to Midnight's Children are more specifically Sikh. Despite its emphasis on Sikh identity, Nina Sibal's political opinions may be seen to

coincide with those of Dr. Sripal in the novel, who pleads for religion and politics to be kept apart. Yatra constitutes Sikh identity in terms of religion, language and geography but simultaneously encourages the sifting of only corruption and evil from the Punjab and not the sifting of other religious/ethnic communities agglomerated there.

In The Trotter-Nama plurality and hybridity are privileged by a parodic subversion of the effort to trace individual roots and cultivate individual pedigrees at the cost of a multifaceted whole. The oppositions in this fantasy (described as "a Raj novel gone wrong") defines people who are culturally Indian as against non-Indians, rather than build explodable cultural myths around Anglo-Indians. This is conveyed through the episode concerning Queenie, one of the last of the Trotter line and Eugene's mother, who, after India's Independence, flies back to England to join her true English brethren. However, away from India, she finds an uncontrollable change in herself:

...strange to say, her nose, the tip of which had once been unbearably cold in India, was now unbearably hot. Only when she held it close to her embroidery (she worked tablecloths with flame-of-forest and hibiscus and laburnum) did the pain subside. There had been a period in between when it adjusted wonderfully to the new climate, but over the past year it had gone from warm to hot, and now it looked as if only a tropical climate would bring it relief. (The Trotter-Nama, 554.)

Besides, in England, Queenie was turning brown (as Krishna

had in Yatra) as if her skin was forcing her Indian identity upon her. "...[S]he was dark enough that one Sunday when she thought she'd worship in another suburb the verger said kindly, meaning to clarify, 'This is an Anglican church'." (554) Queenie is ready to go home to India though she suspects that the process would start all over again in reverse. Queenie's discomfiture emphasises the fact that the plurality and hybridity which is India, can hardly be duplicated elsewhere, including in England, where such duplications get differentiated and slotted into graded rungs of social hierarchies.

Finally, The Memory of Elephants takes India's lessons of integrated living to America -- a locale that generally constructs India as part of its 'Other'. The relevance of India's social mosaic is shifted to a world arena. Tolerance and understanding, which the Parsis cultivate, shows them in the novel, to be potential role-models and advocates of biculturalism for an American audience that tends to relapse into a spirit of Crusadic religious intolerance.

In emphasising India's plenitude, each novel highlights a balancing act done with materials of different kinds. Guru Nanak's "There is no real Hindu and no real Muslim" uses religion to sound a marked rejection of the claims of both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies to indicate the true path

of salvation.¹ The Memory of Elephants stresses Parsi culture but the communicating metaphors are drawn from English classics. Thus Homi is Ebenezer Scrooge looking upon the Ghost of Christmas Past. In The Trotter-Nama, introverted Anglos undo any resemblance to the British Raj, either in their lifestyles or in the literature they produce; while in Midnight's Children, which can hardly be called Muslim,

The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.²

The challenges of a plural society can be faced either by making rigid the alleged differences by fossilizing India in antinomies (as the Emergency, which Midnight's Children ends with, does) or by accepting the fluidity of differences as a positive quality (as Yatra, The Trotter-Nama and The Memory of Elephants do). In Midnight's Children, at the point where the inclusive principle fails, another kind of beginning is on the anvil. This is the compelling need to record the past which Saleem feels when he is on the verge of disappearing. The act of writing becomes a cathartic effort at recapturing his control over the word through language: "This is why I have resolved to confide in paper" (MC, 37). Similarly, the cathartic effect of preserving experience at the end of personal apocalypses is present in The Trotter-Nama and The Memory of Elephants too. This highlights the importance of memory (individual and collec-

tive) -- often fallible, and in The Trotter-Nama deliberately parodic. The centrality of the pickle factory in Midnight's Children, where fruits like truth are being preserved against the corruption of the clock, even though the flavour changes in the process, is matched by the profligate imitation of copies and the laboured paper-chase by Eugene in The Trotter-Nama. Saleem's, Krishna's, Eugene's and Homi's individual consciousness expand to include the memories of their respective families which in turn expand to include the memories of their religious/ethnic community experiences, and then to include India herself, because either figuratively or literally, the whole of India gets implicated in the bildungsroman of these protagonists. Thus, their family sagas are the sagas of India; and in a plural culture where several sagas can co-exist, each of these sagas point to a different and highly individualistic identification with the experience called India.

Notes:

1. Francis Robinson, ed., The Cambridge Encyclopaedia of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, Bhutan and The Maldives (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p.343.
2. W.B. Yeats, 'The Second Coming', The Faber Book of Modern Verse, ed. Michael Roberts (London: Faber and Faber, 1965, reprint 1976), p.58.

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