

## Narrative Strategies: Past and Present

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Narratives can be implicit, symbolic and concealed, or explicit, realistic and open. But always, behind them are strategies. These strategies take poetic, dramatic or fictional forms according to their inner requirements or exigencies of the situations, whether of an oral communal nature, or written individual nature. Strategies have significantly changed over the years, from the past to the present, and through the opening up of the native mind to the global challenge, and the coming of the written word. Indian narrative strategies, in addition, have faced the challenge of the colonial experience, that many Indian writers and critics feel has resulted in a kind of amnesia that has obliterated a rich past. Others feel that the past persists, but within the oral traditions of the illiterate majority. This concern about a lost heritage is the sensitive reaction of a literate elite finding itself increasingly distanced from the collective memory (and its languages) of the illiterate, rural, tribal and peasant population. On the other hand, there is the sensitive contemporary Indian writer who uses the English language either because he or she is living in some English-speaking nation, or because he or she feels more comfortable with this language taught as the most important language in schools in India. Whatever the situation, we are poised delicately at the point of a vibrant and creative debate.

I see the discourse taking shape in three distinct sections. The first section is the theoretical premise that emerges out of this debate. This section will take up the views and experiences of a cross section of contemporary Indian writers (poets, dramatists and fiction writers) as they try in their own ways to negotiate between a native or personal past going increasingly out of focus, and a globalizing present that seems to be creating this distance or orientalizing this exotic past into a market force. This cross section ranges from writers with deeply traditional views about culture and language; writers holding the middle path; and writers caught in diasporic situations

(feeling linguistically and culturally cut off from their native roots) and finding English as the most comfortable language. The second section will examine some of the strategies used in traditional narrative structures (poetic, dramatic, epics and tales) that have survived due to the oral nature of communication and are now available not only in written texts but also in excellent translations. This section will act as a background against which the final section will be seen in terms of losses and gains as one moves from the oral to the written word en route the colonial experience. The religious, social, political, erotic and romantic nature of these communal narratives—as they grew through the centuries—educating and entertaining as the enchanting chants got embedded in public memory, have become transformed. The third section will examine certain contemporary texts to study the manner in which narrative strategies have altered under the pressures of the private written word and the effects of globalization. The texts examined are all written originally in English. This is only for the purpose of studying the modernizing effect in its extreme case. The autobiographical imperative is perhaps the strongest force that has emerged out of this situation. The private written word, as different from the communicated oral word gestured across, opens vistas of introspective individuating writing that seek its own unknown *sahrdaya* somewhere out there, all over the world. Yet the communal concerns are there—tradition and roots exist—though fragmented, and like a broken mirror, seeking and trying to recover an imagined connecting totality that the narrative could achieve. Books of poems, plays, a book of short stories, and two novels, feature in this section only to reveal that whatever be the contemporary form, it is prompted by the inner demands of the fragmented individuated self as it seeks to merge itself into a vaster symbolic life. In the ancient oral narratives, the individual narrator did so secretly in the act of narrating and gesturing, making his own contribution to an existing structure (very much like in classical music and dance even today).

### Section 1 : Writers Creating Theory

The past, for a contemporary writer, can be an individual personal past or a vast mythical, historical past. Both these pasts shape the present of the writer and the milieu in which the writer is writing. In the Indian situation, the historical past of the colonial experience being more recent, quite overpowering, and, one must admit, also

in many ways creatively enriching, it has come at many crucial junctures into sharp conflict with the vast mythical frameworks that evolved through a community of beliefs and rituals through the centuries. English education, with its emphasis on the written word, on the one hand has opened up vast global vistas which can tempt any writer; on the other hand, in the urban and semi urban centres, it has obliterated the collective memory that was passed on from generation to generation through oral narrative traditions. The language being used by the contemporary writer determines the closeness of that writer to the grand narratives of the past. Many contemporary writers have felt that their education—even in the vernacular language—has distanced them from the language and culture of the illiterate peasants and tribals, who, interestingly, in India, are still the preservers of pristine native sources of language and culture. Dialects would be closer, and at the other extreme of the spectrum would be English. Caught between the region, the state, the nation and the globe, language and culture fracture the identity of the contemporary writer in disturbing ways. But a vibrant theoretical discourse emerges when we try to see how the Indian writers within this spectrum have coped with this situation in unique and original ways. Unfortunately, I have no tribal or peasant writers (the word writer itself sounds absurd in this context) expressing their identity crisis and ways of coping with it. This is because they do not face this identity crisis. It does not exist for them, still steeped as they are in community culture and the oral tradition. This crisis itself is the fallout of the colonial experience, as we shall increasingly notice. Individualism and the concept of historical time are alien concepts that have their own insidious attraction, however much we idealize the lost community sense, values, beliefs, rituals and mythical frameworks of time.

Thus, a writer like Girish Karnad (1994) in *In Search of a Theatre* intensely feels the tension between 'the cultural past of the country and its colonial past, the attractions (simultaneous) between Western modes of thought and our own traditions'. He recounts how he would sit up at nights with his servants, watching Yakshagana performances and the later impact of watching Strindberg's *Miss Julie* directed by Ebrahim Alkazi; of how he 'stepped straight out of mythological plays lit by torches and petromax lamps straight into Strindberg and dimmers'. It was a mind-blowing experience with a kind of mixed reaction, fascination as well as recoil: 'by the norms I had been brought up on, the very notion of laying bare the inner recesses of

the human psyche like this for public consumption seemed obscene'. The fascination for the west made him train himself to 'write in English, in preparation for the conquest of the west'. Yet, when he found himself writing his first play, it was in Kannada and on the mythological story of king Yayati, from the *Mahabharata*. Karnad admits with admirable honesty that though the content of this play came from the innumerable mythological plays he had been brought up on, the form came from his exposure to western theatre. Later, in retrospect, he also discovered that within the mythological content of the play, he had secretly poured his own personal emotions: 'my anxieties at that moment, my resentment with all those (his father specially) who seemed to demand that I sacrifice my future (just like the youngest son of King Yayati)' (brackets, mine). It is fascinating to see how for a writer like Girish Karnad, his past (personal and mythical) provided him with 'a readymade narrative within which' he could 'contain and explore' his 'insecurities', yet there was nothing in his past that could provide him with a 'dramatic structure'. 'Even to arrive at the heart of one's own mythology the writer has to follow signposts planted by the West, a paradoxical situation for a culture in which the earliest extant play was written in AD 200!' As one moves slowly through the journey of his exploration of the right Indian theatre for himself, one finds him rejecting Parsi theatre for its superficial bourgeois secularism, and Sanskrit drama as 'an elitist phenomenon ... remote from the general populace'. Karnad rejects the Indian version of the realistic middle class theatre for its confined living room reality and its inability to see beyond it 'at the socio-political forces raging in the world outside, as well as the battleground where values essential to one's individuality are fought out and defended'. He felt that 'nothing of consequence ever happens or is supposed to happen in an Indian living room ... Space in a traditional home is ordered according to caste hierarchies as well as the hierarchies within the family'. Later on, I will contest this point through some of Mahesh Dattani's plays. But Karnad obviously was searching for something else. I think his rejection of these middle class living room plays has more to it than meets the eye. Perhaps he wanted to come close to the folk and folk theatre and this discovery is initially through the historical play *Tughlaq* modelled on the Parsi theatre division between shallow and deep scenes. In *Tughlaq*, the so-called shallow scenes involving the 'mass populace' started 'bulging with energy hard to control'. The problem still remained. It was to find ways and means of relating this 'rich, vital and meaningful'

theatre with its 'theatrical devices, half curtains, masks, improvisations, music and mime' with the 'city dwellers' like him. He felt he could do it in *Hayavadana*. Taking the story from *Kathasaritasagara*, and Thomas Mann's further psychological development of the story in *The Transposed Heads*, Karnad experimented with masks and music in the tradition of the folk theatre, and moved closer to the oral tradition in his *Nagamandala*. What attracted Karnad to the folk theatre was its 'energy' that seemed to 'uphold tradition' on the one hand, but at the same time had 'the means of questioning these values, of making them literally stand on their head'. He did exactly this kind of experimentation in *Hayavadana*, and its success in urban centres is because of this very reason. The complex urban mind would not be happy with the mere upholding of traditional values. Karnad learnt the 'potentiality of non-naturalistic techniques' from Bertolt Brecht though he realised that in India the 'alienation effect' was never required. I have dwelt at length with Karnad because he gives a detailed personal account of his experiments and experiences in a succinct and clear manner, running through the entire gamut of tradition, contemporaneity, India and the West in his search for the right Indian theatre. Besides, as Balachandra Nemade has so rightly observed, 'of all the forms of literature, it is Drama that seems to have preserved the vestige of oral culture within its structure'.

Unlike Karnad, a writer like Balachandra Nemade, through the course of his explorations, has arrived at extreme traditionalist views. Nemade (1994) is pulled to the Nativist extreme of oral forms of literature and is unwilling to admit or even in the least succumb to the influence of the western modes of thinking and writing. His fascination for the act of oral communication with its 'visual and auditory participation; high degree of interaction between living persons present in the communication link' makes him reflect sadly on the increasing loss and redundancy of this mode of literary communication. He prizes the 'paralinguistic features of orality', its 'gestures', 'facial expressions', 'bodily movements', 'choreography', forming a subsystem of 'entire body language'. Nemade observes that the 'written culture' can only boast of '24 of the 1652 distinct languages spoken in our country'. His is a case heavily loaded against the cultural elitism of the educated, speaking for the unlettered masses of India, steeped in a rich and varied oral literature. Being a Marathi writer himself, he gives the example of the Warkaris who have recently extended their regional centres where the Dindis meet twice

a year, singing *kirtans*, *bhajans* and *garuds* at night, educating and entertaining the villagers and moving on. Though Nemade does not talk openly about his own works as Karnad does, it is understood that such an orientation would be reflected in his literary outpourings in unique ways, blending his contemporary mind with the rich traditional tapestry with which he is so familiar and intimate.

Unlike Nemade, but close to his thinking, U.R. Ananthmurthy is haunted by a sense of identity crisis. It is not dissimilar from Karnad's, but Ananthmurthy (1982) does not trace the full course of the crisis and his attempts at resolution. Nemade's identification with the oral tradition and Warkaris and his complete disregard for the western modes of thinking and writing, perhaps save him from this crisis. But the cases of Karnad (as we have seen) and Ananthmurthy (as we will see) are different. Ananthmurthy contends that: 'many of our regional languages, despite their rich literary traditions, were actually preserved by illiteracy; for the literate in our country have always acquired the language of the ruling elites, whether it was Sanskrit, Persian, or English'. Ananthmurthy's primary concern, as we can see here is with the writer's choice of language, which he feels is a 'moral choice'. Though a writer can be influenced by western literatures, he need not choose English as his language. Ananthmurthy chooses Kannada, but here too he has a problem. Kannada may have a literary tradition of a thousand years, but the contemporary writer can only use the 'current language that has become a part of his experience in his own lifetime'. Not being able to wish away (also, not wanting to) English and the impact of western literatures, the writer would endeavour to embody in his language of choice ideas that belong to another language and culture. This, the writer might be able to do. But the problem lies elsewhere. Modern Kannada itself in this process of modernization, distanced itself from the language of the illiterate peasant of this same region. Ananthmurthy is haunted by the image of this peasant who has actually preserved the vigour of the root language, because he is illiterate. Unfortunately, the writer is unable to establish communication with this vital figure, distanced as he is both by language and culture. And to bridge the gap would be to educate this peasant away from the vigour and vitality of his language and make him 'a man of the sideways looking middle class, like me'. It is indeed a situation of crisis, very pessimistically put, and without any resolution in sight. And yet, I feel, that working under such a creative tension would perhaps do something to the language of

'moral choice'- make it mediate an inch both ways, towards the peasant attraction as also the western attraction.

If writers like Nemade are at one extreme, then writers like Ananthmurthy and Karnad are writers in the middle band, where Nirmal Verma, who himself would be somewhere there, so rightly sums up: 'as a result of colonial uprootedness, an Indian writer has to pass through various stages of metamorphosis before he can arrive at his authentic self'.<sup>1</sup> This 'authentic self', as we have seen, can be a creative mirage that pulls the writer on his/her own unique journey. But for Verma, it is a journey where this authentic self reveals itself through a contrast for which an intense awareness of 'the other' is an essential prerequisite. Though this is a philosophical as also cultural statement, but what Verma says here is simultaneously true about Nemade, Ananthmurthy, Karnad and himself. Nemade's entire semantics of orality and community literature comes sharply into foreground focus only in the background threat of written literature and the cult of individuality.

Ananthmurthy's 'peasant' comes into focus in contrast to the spectrum of artists and writers whose portraits he sharply etches - ranging from the flamboyantly *swadeshi* (middle class basically), to the showy Bohemianism (westernized middle class again) to the painter who could have been a *sadhu* 'except for his powerful and well articulated English'. The other, in Verma's scheme, is strictly western culture and its overpowering shadow falling on the Indian scenario. This is because, as Verma feels, this was the major challenge that India faced in its entire history of foreign invaders. This culture tries to overpower India's sense of 'time', 'space' and 'selfhood'. The Europeanized education "essentially implied acceptance of the historical idea of progress which had established Europe as the vanguard in the field of knowledge and enlightenment. From this position, it was just a small step to accept the image a European presented of himself as an ideal man. The idealized image of the European man subverted the Hindu image of his own 'self', reducing it to the status of a 'sub-self', a mirror accessory to a larger reality, not of Brahma (the *ātmā paramātmā* mythical time structure) (brackets, mine) but of the spirit of History moving across the earth through centuries and finding its ultimate fulfillment in the European man... As the Indian was historicized in the European context, he was de-Indianized in the context of his own 'traditional self'."

I have given a longish quotation from Nirmal Verma's text as I feel that here he has been able to reach into the heart of the matter.

To experience this process of de-Indianisation and then be able to return to one's own sense of time, space and selfhood is the fate of the sensitive Indian writer. Verma gives the example of Ajneya. Verma himself would be an example.

Verma seems to have arrived at the philosophical crux of the matter when he talks of time structures and notions of selfhood. The mythical framework of thinking that is part of the oral tradition that Karnad, Nemade and Ananthmurthy feel is the essence of the Indian past was seriously challenged by the spirit of history that European education introduced. The historical notions of time and its emphasis on the emerging individuation of a particular race, nation or individual clashed with the *ātmā paramātmā* notions of time, eternity and selfhood that was the basis of oral narrative structures. The oral narrative structures were mythical superstructures built through centuries on which the individual narrator innovated quietly in the act of passing it on to the future. The individuality of the narrator was unimportant and so was his historical position. The written historical structures opened fields of individual self-exploration that was attractive on the one hand, but also lonely and private. But even here, the propelling force was to merge the individual self into a symbolic life, into the historical forces, into the spirit of history. This autobiographical imperative is perhaps the strongest attraction in contemporary times. But this does not in any way exclude innovative narrative experimentation that would come to terms with both the individual and the vast mythical or historical past essential for symbolizing the self. Indian writers who write in English, based in India or abroad, have made remarkable experiments in narrative strategies, perhaps because the challenge is greater. The past and one's roots make their own demands on a language that might not be ideally suited for the purpose. A Kannada writer or a Bengali writer based in his/her region is closer through his/ her language to regional and ancestral roots as well as the immediate reality around, rather than a displaced Indian writer based in England, America or regionally displaced within India.

Salman Rushdie (1991) makes two important statements in 'Imaginary Homelands' that sharply delineates his difference from the traditionalists and even the middle path holders. One is in his attitude towards the past and the other in his attitude towards the use of the English language. He talks of the past as a 'loss', a 'country from which we have all emigrated'. He feels that the writer who is 'out-of-country and even out-of-language may experience this loss



in an intensified form'. Thus, he talks of the broken mirror of the past with many of the pieces lost and builds a positive force out of this loss and fragmentation when he says; 'writers are no longer sages, dispensing the wisdom of centuries'. This he calls the 'guru-illusion' (of the oral narrative tradition may be). Writers have been forced by 'cultural displacement to accept the provisional nature of all truths, all certainties, have perhaps modernism forced upon them'. But this displacement, this fragmentation, this distance can actually give the writer a clearer, more open and comprehensive perspective: 'insiders and outsiders... this stereoscopic vision is perhaps what we can offer in place of a "whole vision" (of the sages of the oral tradition)' (brackets, mine). It is with this globalized perspective that the writer can get a multidimensional perspective on his homeland, its past and his own past with an imagination that 'opens the universe' 'a little more', in its reconstruction. About the use of English, Rushdie has an interesting thing to say both for the Indian writer writing in English and for the British Indian writer. One, 'it needs remaking for our own purposes' and secondly, this 'linguistic struggle is a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between cultures, within ourselves and the influences at work upon our societies. To conquer English may be to complete the process of making ourselves free'. Both these categories can be clubbed together in his phrase: 'we are translated men'. People say 'something always gets lost in translation'. But Rushdie obstinately clings to the view: 'something can also be gained'. All this applies to both categories of writers writing in English, with the exception that 'the British Indian writer simply does not have the option of rejecting English anyway'.

Much of what Rushdie says would be applicable to the Indian writer within India writing in English, barring the 'out of country' loss. Shashi Deshpande, whose father was a Kannada writer, mother a Marathi, tries to locate her preference for English. In *The Power Within*,<sup>2</sup> Shashi Deshpande (2000) makes certain basic observations about a contemporary writer's struggle, on the one hand to find one's own voice and individuality, and at the same time feeling a sense of isolation in the absence of a community that is physically present. Writing in English and being a woman add a greater challenge in this struggle. In an introspective tone, she recapitulates: 'In a sense it was due to my father as well that I was educated in English. Knowing his deep love for his own language Kannada, and for Sanskrit literature, this seems surprising. Perhaps it was

because my mother and he had two different languages that he opted for a third, a neutral one. Perhaps it was a feeling that it gave us the freedom to move throughout the country.' Most of the writers who write in English in India have either mixed parentage, or are displaced regionally, or belong to a community that uses English as its first language, or have been moved by the beauty of the language itself. Some major problems confront the writer. Prominent among these is the fact that many of the characters featuring within a work do not speak English, and also that many of the readers to whom the writer would like to communicate are not comfortable with English. Nevertheless, as Deshpande observes: 'English is an amazingly flexible and versatile language'. She must have felt within herself what Rushdie had called 'the linguistic struggle, the struggle between cultures within ourselves and influences at work upon our societies'. And to conquer English must have given her a feeling of freedom that would come from the Empire writing back, in its own terms, using the medium of its subjugation. Rushdie had earlier emphasized that English 'needs remaking for our own purposes'. The other problem that Deshpande talks of needs serious consideration: 'there was a sense of isolation; I was part of no writer's group, neither physically, nor literally'. One can understand about the physical part because in the regional languages with their geographical bases, it would not be too difficult to have such groups of writers. But in English, there is a national and international diffusal that is very difficult to cope with. But it is possible to have a literal group both at the virtual and the real level. This seeking of a community is—at a more fundamental level—a symptom of the urge to merge one's individual created self into the flow of a symbolic life that earlier, in the oral tradition, was part of a pre-existing communal structure of beliefs, values and rituals on which the individual narrator innovated anonymously.

## Section 2 : The Past

With so much of reference to the tradition of oral narratives of the past coming up, it might be fruitful to examine the structures and components of these ancient literary expressions, that comprise our collective past. First, I will try to probe deeper into the structural complexities of these narratives through what I feel are two essays with exceptional insights. Then I will try to explore some of the contents of these narratives, ranging from the religious, the moral,

the socio-political, the romantic and the erotic. I hope to arrive at some kind of complex collective superstructure of values, beliefs and rituals that still might hold the interest for the contemporary mind. At the same time, I will try to weigh the advantage of the autobiographical imperative of the individuated self in a historical context as against the anonymity formula of the orally transmitted community text immersed in mythical time structures.

Vidya Niwas Mishra (1994) identifies the roles of these narratives. The primary role was integrating 'all life... universalizing the basic emotions'. This role, he felt, was what caused 'the aesthetic vibration... by the use of metaphor and imagery, rhythmic patterns and assonances of both word and meaning'. The secondary role was educative: 'to kindle the imaginative faculty of the child' and to 'inculcate a perfected art of communication'. The secondary role saw to it that the accumulated and collective recollections of the past did not remain a thing of the past but became a living force, constantly getting embedded in our life. The primary role saw to the incantatory and aesthetic quality essential for empathizing, enjoying and memorizing. Though there is a scope for the individual narrator to innovate both in the gestured telling and in the aesthetic poetic quality of the words and the tale, and quietly adding a new angle, or detail, it would ultimately become a part of a continuing structure into which the innovations of the individual narrator blended quietly. The name of the innovator was unimportant. These were the *ākhyānās*, meaning 'the act of making something well known through oral transmission'. Yet there was scope for individuality. *Kathās* and *gāthās* in prose and verse forms were based on plots imagined by the author. Mishra gives examples of a few narratives. The voice of Thunder (Prajapati) in the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* is his first example. Besides the features identified by Mishra in this narrative, there are some more having contemporary significance that came to my mind. In a unique way, this episode represents the symbolic and sound origins of language where the symbol and the sound contain multiplicity of narratives that could flow out of it depending on the perspective of the listener and also the interpretation and further narration. The same sound 'da' is interpreted differently by the gods, the demons and the humans. Secondly, it reveals the fundamental poetic nature of communication and transmission, which is in the silence that exists as space between the speaker and the listener (later, the writer and the reader). Later, when I take up the implicit narratives in a book of poems or a book of short stories, this

will be of great importance. In this silence and space are future narratives born. Thirdly, it is a metaphor for the movement of narrative from its poetic mythical origins into the flow of history, from the divine to the human, from eternity into time.

The second narrative, which is a folklore related to the autumn festival, similarly highlights further qualities of narrative structures. The girl (daughter of the folk singer) triumphs over her cursed fate through the power of sequential and ritualistic action and its narration. If the Upanisadic story had highlighted the magical symbolic quality of the chanted word as containing multiplicity of narrative meaning, here we move into narrative proper. The fate of the girl cursed to widowhood, is tested on a calf, a tree, a stone (she is married to these in sequence) with disastrous results as she circumambulates around them. On being left to her lonely fate, she does a kind of ritualistic backward movement of circumambulation and restores the rock and then gains a handsome prince as husband. On being questioned by her father on his return, she reconstructs the story forward till its crucial point. Such seems to be the power of being able to ritualistically connect, organize the fragments of life sequentially into a whole, the power of narrative. I was fascinated by the way Mishra recounts and analyses these stories. But most of the inference is my own. Such is the power of Mishra's narrative in this essay. Mishra has another extremely fascinating narrative (it is in the telling) that forms the fulcrum of *Bṛhatkathā*.

It is not a mere coincidence that Gulam Mohammad Sheikh (1994), in "Story of the Tongue and the Text: The Narrative Tradition", begins his talk with a detailed structure of Somadeva's *Kathāsaritasāgara*, which is believed to be an abridged version of Guṇādhyā's *Bṛhatkathā*. One is able to draw interesting inferences from both these versions, Sheikh's and Mishra's. First is the divine origin, Śiva telling Parvati stories of love and adventure about the Vidyādhara who were capable of traversing several worlds. The divine world of the Devas was rejected by Śiva because they were too self-contained and complacent. The human world was rejected because mortals were perennially in distress and total chaos prevailed. Already the stories have begun the process of negotiating between the eternal celestial heights and the temporal depths of the human world, via the Vidyādhara. But the complex pattern of this two-way journey is through the two Ganas. The first one, Puśpadanta, is cursed by Pārvatī for eavesdropping while the stories were being told by Śiva in the secret inner chamber. He is to be born into a

cycle of lives as a mortal and as Varuruci, the great grammarian. The second Gaṇa, pleading for mercy, meets a similar fate but succeeds in managing a boon of deliverance. Interestingly, the deliverance has connection with forgetting and remembering, of thinking backward and narrating forward. The first Gaṇa, having forgotten the tales due to the curse, would be able to remember only after he met an earth spirit Yakṣa, reborn as a demon, a Piśāca, in the deep Vindhya forest. The stories would have to be told to this Yakṣa, who in turn would tell them to the second Gaṇa, now reborn as Guṇādhyā, the archetypal disseminator of the *Bṛhatkatha*. Guṇādhyā in turn would be delivered from the curse by narrating the stories to mortals in the human world. To remember the stories, he inscribes them in blood on barks of trees in the forest and when spurned by the king for this grotesque and gory act, he decides to consecrate them to fire. Seven series are thus destroyed. Only the eighth survives as he tells it to the birds and animals and the repentant king comes to hear them. Several intriguing features, both at the level of structure and content, exist in the superstructure itself. The curse of the failure of memory is the greatest curse as it closes the path of deliverance. Deliverance is linked to recovery of memory, reintegrating parts into a whole, and the ability to narrate forward in a complex organized sequence. Just narrating would not do. They would have to be shared and passed on into the future, into the complex human world. The stories of love and adventure, the most potent excitants of human energy, would involve and trap into the mesh of human desires and aspirations out of sheer curiosity. Curiosity, thus, is a central motif. It is curiosity that lies behind the curse on the Gaṇas. But release from this cycle of human desires and aspirations, symbolized in the stories, is by remembering and narrating in an organized fashion so that the mind of the new generation is caught in this mesh of human relationships. They, in turn, would similarly seek their release in a chain of stories that connect generation to generation through a complex network of universalized human desires, emotions, aspirations that belong to the entire community, a collective memory into which the individual narrator can introduce his own little innovation quietly. Deliverance means to be released back to the divine fold from where one had fallen. Recovery of memory and sequence of the originating stories entails a kind of vision that goes back to Śiva and Pārvaṭī. The vision behind the stories lies in the traversing mediation between the eternal, divine, perfectly patterned world and the temporal, human, imperfect

and chaotic world, that symbolically only the Vidyadharas could emblemize.

Looking at the complex superstructure revealed through these stories, it is possible to read the existence and persistence of certain central motifs, though vastly transformed in the contemporary context. Leaving aside the complex ritualistic network of Gods, Vidyādhara, Yakṣas, Devas, Piśācas, demons, mortals that formed the structures of belief of that time, one is intrigued by the fabulous time structures that hold the stories within stories framework, where eternity and time, myth and history are woven in a rich tapestry. The individual narrator is lost in the collected and collective maze, but lost happily because there is no individual or personal emotion that goes unrepresented in this maze of stories. It is possible to merge and universalize oneself just through the act of narrating, simultaneously imparting just that unique individual gesture or tone that adds a special flavour to the performance. From here, when we move to contemporary times, the crux of the matter lies in the inner imperative to universalize something that is personal. In doing so one can feel that one's life, emotions, experiences, thinking, values are part of a symbolic life. It gives a sense of meaning and a kind of release from the sense of isolated individuality that can become extremely disturbing and depressing. Today, one would read this as an autobiographical imperative that is central to the act of writing. The problem is that this autobiographical act is full of uncertainty and peril in the absence (or breakdown) of the collective superstructure of narrative that gave the ancient individual narrator a sense of belonging within which he could innovate. The peril and uncertainty at that time was in the loss of memory and the isolation and cursed situation it created.

### Section 3 : Contemporary Texts

There is a metaphor in Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*<sup>3</sup> that poignantly poses a problem peculiar to our times, and to our post-colonial situation, specially highlighting the case of the Indian writer writing in English. When Rahel returns to the history site where the two major dramas in the story had taken place (Velutha's death and Sophie Mol's death), the history site has been transformed. From the haunted and haunting ruins of a colonial past, it has become a starred hotel catering to foreign (American and European mainly) tourists. To this hotel, the Kathakali dancers come, bringing their

traditional dance form born in the backwaters of their ancient land, carrying stories and legends as old as time, into which they secretly pour their own stories, emotions, passions. The emotions and passions in the *Mahabharata* easily and intensely correlate with individual emotions and passions in the life and imagination of the dancers. But to cater to the short attention span of the tourists (there is the problem of communicating the language and grammar), they have to edit and mould their performance to twenty-minute slots, displaying only the most eye-catching, dazzling and showy movements. But while returning, they stop the night at the Ayemenem temple, and through the night, intoxicated and delirious, the pent up stories pour out as they dance for themselves, their gods, and pay their respect to their ancient art (its language and grammar) and its mysterious ways. Caught between the dollar dazzle (money, money, money, it is a rich man's world), the inner demands of their creative urges, and the discipline of their art form (its strict language and grammar), a strange kind of complexity is born.

I do not know how much of a personal statement is hidden in this metaphor, but Roy's own art seems to be caught within the complexes of this precarious and subtle negotiation. There are some stories embedded deep in memory, childhood, that need to be told, ghosts exorcised. These stories have rooted connections to one's land, one's mother tongue, native culture and traditions (Kerala, Syrian Christians) and at the same time come to terms with contemporary changes and the coming of the modern world. On the one hand, the language and the style of telling the stories have to deal with the vocabulary of childhood, the naming of the land, its customs and history, and on the other hand, if the language is English (which it is in this case), it has to keep an international readership, with its standards and values, steadily in focus.

At a more general level, this becomes a negotiation between the personal and the universal, home and the world, the regional, the national and the international. Centrally, I see it as a constant negotiation between the autobiographical imperative and the demands of fiction. The first is always there, either openly or in a hidden way, in all creative expression. The scope of the second is mostly determined by language and culture specific factors (*Bhasha* literatures or English, in this case). Here, as I have earlier pointed out, we are dealing with Indian writers (poets, novelists, short story writers and playwrights) writing in English. And interestingly, because of the friction between the mother tongue and English, the

colonial hangover and postcolonial carry over, the bifurcated tongue and its cultural clash, creative writers can feel the challenge at its utmost. Thus, I have chosen writers (writing in English) who: (a) Have displayed strong regional connections in their texts and have felt its tension with the modern mind and the so-called contemporary worldwide standards and interests. (b) Have created texts concerned with contemporary Indian middle class urban society that are delicately balanced between the traditional ethics and modern global values. Finally, I have chosen (c) first and second-generation diasporic Indian writers representing exile, nostalgia, global identities and an intense quest for roots. All the texts display richly different narrative strategies, trying to bridge the gap between home and the world, or trying to create channels of communication between native roots and globetrotting minds. In doing so all the texts examined create fascinating experimental narrative crossovers from the autobiographical to the fictional and back.

In *The God of Small Things*, the autobiographical imperative is very strong and there is a subtle, technically achieved border crossing between autobiography and fiction. The third person narrative of Rahel is thinly disguised fiction using the technique of autobiographical narrative strategies of an absent narrator. The return to the past, one's home, childhood, land, the history site littered with traces from the past, memories, fragments, ruins, to an altered reality that is still good enough to reconstruct a story—are these not the building blocks of autobiography? Add to this the present riddled with haunting ghost images from chaotic, half-understood past (due to childhood and adolescent innocence) crying out for a narrative order. The achieving of this order would perhaps help in the process of exorcising guilt, remorse, seething anger (at being used, manipulated, when one was too young to understand), regaining composure and gaining a maturity of perspective that only time can bring through the narrative. The centrality of Rahel's perspective is another narrative strategy that has strong autobiographical connections. Rahel's own description of herself down to the details of her 'absurdly beautiful collar bones', 'wild hair tied back to look straight though it wasn't', and 'tiny diamond gleaming in one nostril' is a sharply etched self portrait as anyone looking at the author's picture can immediately recognize. But the creation of the twins is the coup de etat. It is a finely thought out psychological ploy capturing the fracturing of a child's innocent holistic world by adult manipulation. The thinking narrating mind of Rahel and the



perpetrating acting self of Estha, innocently, incoherently doing things leading to disastrous events, are twin parts of the same fragmented self, separated and seeking the healing, comforting union (sexual?) for peace, composure and release from the tense, tortured, knotted, termite-like self-reproach and remorse. The narrative leads to this union, thus seeking of a lost sense of wholeness and balance. In the beginning 'Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or Us'. Then later: 'now she thinks of Estha, Rahel as Them. Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, Limits have appeared like a team of trolls in their separate horizons'. Towards the end of the narrative, the intense scene of incest has to be read in the symbolic light of the regaining of the lost oneness after the fragmented parts have been able to simultaneously come to terms with their essential innocence and sharing it in a world that has otherwise slipped by and altered irrevocably.

Deep down, the compulsion to narrate is entrenched in the recognition of an ancient tale being retold innovatively and originally due to the pressures of immediate and current circumstances and situations. This tale is the age-old tale of love laws being broken (Ammu and Velutha's story is its latest reincarnation) and the nemesis this calls upon itself. The tone is of defiance of the love laws to the point of the celebration of incest (breaking the first primal love law) in the most beautiful and symbolic manner. But 'however for practical purposes, in a hopelessly practical world' a plot is constructed and a story told about things that began with a Plymouth journey to Cochin. This merging of a contemporary personal story into an archetypal ancient tale, and the need to make it coherent to the practical needs of a hopelessly practical world—does this not bring the metaphor of the Kathakali dancers back into focus?

Though the Booker jury is by no means being equated to the foreign tourists sitting and watching the Kathakali performance in the History House site (the new starred Hotel), it is not too difficult to notice some of the features of the story that might have been an instant hit with the jury (well aimed by the author or otherwise). But we must not forget here that the book we are reading is also not a twenty-minute slot performance to please and entertain these foreigners. This book contains the entire dance, even the one danced in the Ayemenem temple through the night. A dance that has no element of show or attention catching stunts, but is a genuine expression of deep inner feelings being poured into an archetypal tale, in a classical fundamental form. Thus, the book becomes a

curious blend of certain perennial, evergreen storyline interests (the love tragedy angle), a classically perfect circular narrative structure innovating on autobiographical fiction, an almost revolutionary use of the English language (born, as we shall see, out of an intense inner necessity, rather than being just an eye-catching stunt), and a bitter critical awareness of our times and its many fads and fallacies (which Roy uses to her full advantage). In this last, there is a possibility of reading the twenty-minute slot stunts. Roy has caught the pulse of the present, post-colonial, post-modern, post-Marxist, feminist mood and capitalized on it, though it is so much a part of the genuine personal anger in the novel that I, for one, cannot fully agree with this criticism. If Roy's mind and moods in her text (communicated through Rahel) coincide with a major section of existing minds and moods all over the world, she should not be blamed for it. Thus, it is very difficult to say where the inner compulsions of the storyteller are working and where, it is only for 'practical purposes'. Interestingly, the storyteller has herself metaphorically and through statements (as we have seen), given the tools for this criticism.

The playful use of the English language, appropriate to the child's eye perspective that is being reconstructed, is very much a part of the Indian child's process of learning the language with landmark texts and English movies featured prominently (*Lochinvar*, *Julius Caesar*, *Sound of Music*). It is a colonial and post-colonial experience that many will immediately recognize as a part of their own childhood and education. Playing with grammar and pronunciation is part of the learning process in children and at the same time, this becomes a classic case of the empire writing back. This kind of use of language also helps in maintaining a tone that never gets philosophical and sentimental but playfully dissolves all pretensions of serious intent, hiding a bitter adult anger, resentment, and feeling of having been used while innocent. It strikes out by making the adult world ridiculous, pompous, selfish and ridden with hypocrisy. All this goes very well with contemporary intellectual views in the west. Add to this the breakdown of the grand narratives of the past, symbolized through the title itself. This is a book embodying the little narratives about the god of small things, neglected things, oppressed and suppressed things. The grand narratives of the grand gods (Christianity, religious, spiritual ideals and philosophies, politics, social moral laws, Marxism, even Nature itself, like the river Meenachal, has been tamed and civilized) have outlived their

prominence and degenerated into hypocrisy and deceit, or been commercialized beyond recovery. All this, rather than playing to the galleries of the western readership, is presented with a lot of seething anger and bitterness against certain clogs in the system and community depicted. The slow seething poison injected during the innocence of childhood has to be brought out into the open, the agents exposed, made public and universal, so that the hurt is cured through a subtle revenge. The revenge is the transfer of the private anger into the public mind as it recognizes the malaise that has been targeted. The semi autobiographical fiction achieves this through its narrative strategies.

But other autobiographical fiction might not be this neat, circular and complete. Other narrative strategies have also been used. Example can be made of the use of the drifting, linear narrative of a drifting life as used by Pankaj Mishra (2000). Roy's novel has innovated on a set autobiographical structure of moving backward in memory from a defined narrative present (Rahel's return to Ayemenem), picking up fragments from the chaotic, half understood past and reconstructing them in a forward moving narration till it reaches that same present, altered now by the coherence and holistic vision (Rahel's and Estha's silent and perfect understanding, expressed in their union) that the narrative has achieved. Mishra's story selects a marked point of beginning (that winter when Samar came to Benaras) from the past, with no hint of the present state of the narrator, and meanders through a series of experiences and locations to no definite conclusion, no significant resolution. Otherwise, Mishra uses the straightforward first person autobiographical narrative structure and the fiction often seems to be only in the name. The main motivation of the story seems to be the depiction of Samar's voyage of self discovery as he moves through a succession of significant relationships and events, revealing a host of characters in various stages of their impossible romantic quests, dreamers in the face of the death of dreams. Ultimately it becomes an open-ended spiritual and metaphysical journey.

The language of the novel being English, it has to keep an international readership in mind. We had seen how Roy's work had successfully negotiated this precarious cultural bridge between Ayemenem and the world. Mishra's trump card is Benaras. The romantics' club (sorry for putting it like this) is an international club. This is a story of people who live through their imagination and dreams in hopelessly realistic times. Also, this is an international phenomenon, not country or culture

specific. It is a story of unconventional lives with a strange meeting of east and west. For me, living and teaching in Allahabad University, there are many Samars, Anands and Rajeshes around me who drift away into the unknown. Mishra's own days in Allahabad, Benaras, Dharamshala, form the backdrop, and the centrality of Samar's mind has the author's signature spread out finely throughout the text. But it is Benaras that gets Samar (you could read Mishra here) in touch with the world. Benaras still attracts a lot of foreigners, with its mysterious blend of the traditional and the modern, the spiritual and the secular. Samar's mind is the centre of the various different paths. He is caught between diverse worlds. There is the global world that is opened to him by Miss West, Catherine, Mark. On the other hand there are his own native roots that are fundamentally no different from Anand's or Rajesh's. Only circumstantially, he is in a peculiar urban position where he does not belong to either, yet can relate to both in the course of a meandering, almost destinationless drift which becomes the ultimate spiritual reality underlying the various and varying lives (east and west) narrated.

Samar's mind is able to maintain an ideal narrative balance between subjective involvement in the story and the detached distance to see other lives objectively. He is an avid reader seeking an intellectual academic high, drifting away from his traditional Brahmanical moorings, sucked into the vortex of a shattering cross-cultural drama through his obsessive love for Catherine and his companionship with Miss West, essentially preserved through his deep-rooted philosophical strength of detachment that can only be a part of his inheritance. Rajesh, interestingly, is the flipside of Samar's quest, a grim possibility growing out of similar roots. He has grass root level credentials; rural poverty is the green card here. Samar, from this point of view, is the dispossessed urban self, seeking non-annihilating grass root contact. Rajesh's own story is sad, as he moves from his love for Faiz and Iqbal, to organized east UP crime. But it is a sad story of many students from rural backgrounds in UP, in a tragic representative manner. The best part of Rajesh's story is his tragic zeal to keep Samar's idealism alive by trying to provide undisturbed time and space to him, as a kind of subtle Godfather (though the caste factor is important). Maybe he wants to see his own dreams realized in Samar, with a kind of foreknowledge of his ultimate fate. Mishra is here in home grounds with his student days in Allahabad and Benaras fresh and raw. The autobiographical strain is very strong.

Anand is another imaginary take off from the same grass root level reality, absurdly balanced between his poverty-stricken Bihar roots (not too far from east UP), and the dreamed glamour of Parisian life. If Samar is a fumbling intellectual, bred in the Oxford of the East, Anand represents intense traditional creative talent (bred in the *Gharanas* of Benaras), faltering in a competitive world in an attempt to secure a footing. All are dreamers (Romantics) in a hopelessly real world. The contents of the dreams, though various in forms, are essentially the same. It is to escape from the confines of their immediate realities—whose octopus-like tentacles hold them fast—into a vaster richer life that the world holds like a mirage before their eyes. Be it through the competitive exams leading to bureaucratic bliss (of the IAS), or academic intellectual recognition, artistic achievement, or political ambitions, the nation and the world beckons. Mishra, as a student in Benaras and Allahabad, must have been one among many such dreamers around him.

Interestingly, the west (Miss West is not just a casual name), the land of dreams, comes to the east in Benaras, bringing its own load of dreamers, their sorrows and their unfulfilled quests. Perhaps dreamers and romantics all over the world and in different times have a spiritual similarity as Rajesh so poignantly realizes reading Edmund Wilson's essay on Flaubert's novel *Sentimental Education*: 'it is the story of my life. I know these people well. Your hero, Edmund Wilson, he also knows them.' Miss West, apparently an independent, individual white woman, seems quite self-possessed, self-sufficient in her eastern solitude. She is patroness, friend to Samar, the connecting thread in his relationship with a new, vaster world. Yet she is lost in her own silent tragedy, her own romantic, indefinite, secret waiting for her clandestine meetings. Catherine, a white beautiful vision capable of transporting Anand with his Sitar dreams and Samar with his aimless intellectual drift from their grim sordid realities into another world (a passport to bliss)—yet caught in her own confused quest for an impossible love, an impossible ideal to which she could give herself completely. Then there is Mark, an American, a wandering adventurer seeking relationships and a culture to which he can devote himself. They are all drifting romantics, seeking the impossible in a world that is either spoilt by over opulence and systematization of middle class materialism, or by a glaring savage poverty and its accompanying vices of superficial glamour, lopsided wealth and power. The narrative meanders through these relationships over a selected time span, with strong autobiographical overtones and undertones.

Autobiographically, both the novels by Roy and Mishra are located in places with which the authors had intense relationships, spanning their childhood and youth. In the process of fictionalizing, the novels strategically equate this home and region to the world using the English language, with its peculiar global position and colonial history in our land, as a proper medium for this connection. Mishra's fiction makes a metaphysical equation between the self (autobiographical) with its east UP moorings and origins, and the world in an expansive outward movement, revealing how the essential human situations, despite differences, can relate. Is the English language, with its global baggage of accessories the fit medium for such an endeavour? Samar's use of the language is convincing because in India, with the kind of emphasis on English in the convent schools, or even some of the other non-convent schools (post-colonial, if you may say), Samars do exist (Mishra himself is the apt example). But Rajesh, or for that matter maybe even Anand, does not have this colonial privilege. In fact, many youngsters from rural UP and Bihar are like these young men, and their lack of fluency in English does become a kind of obstacle in opening out to the international experience that the novel explores. But Samar is interestingly poised, as we had noticed, between this vernacular (*Desi* or *Bhasha*) culture and the wider world that English opens. Mishra's debut novel takes its flight from this fundamental post-colonial truth. Roy's strategies in negotiating between home and the world, as we had seen earlier, were remarkably different from Mishra's. But both move outward into the world from regional roots.

In a book of short stories, or even poems, each poem or short story is self-contained and self-sufficient. Thus, they can create breaks and fragments in the total continuous structure of the book; dislocate the centrality of the narrating or narrated protagonist. This discontinuity, in the flow of the evolution of the centralized self or persona, can distract the reader from the secret autobiographical motives that might be self evident in a novel. Nevertheless, such motives exist and find devious means, as we shall see, creating subtler nuances in narrative strategies. Implicit (as opposed to the explicit in the novel) narrative connections might bind poems and short stories within a book. It is for the reader to read these connections that create a greater story that moves from poem to poem or story to story in silent jumps. The only hints and clues that the poet or storyteller might leave could be either in the order in which the stories or poems exist or in the selection of certain stories and poems that

relate to each other in mysterious ways. Such a secret and implicit narrative can be noticed in Jhumpa Lahiri's (1999) debut book of short stories, *Interpreter of Maladies*, for which she received the Pulitzer award. I will select a few of her stories and try to show how a larger story gets revealed if the reader is able to see the hidden connections. Let us begin with the end, that is the last story, 'The Third and Final Continent', which in fact, is the beginning, bringing Eliot's autobiographical lines in *Four Quartets* to mind: 'In my end is my beginning' and also 'in my beginning is my end'. The story is a first person autobiographical narrative of a first-generation Bengali immigrant settler in the US. The culture conflicts and tensions, the problems of adjustment, the difficult days, the arranged marriage, the bride from a conservative background, her culture shock and ways of coping, have a strong ring of the particular and the individual in the telling of the story. But at the same time, the story blends into the stories of thousands of first-generation Bengali settlers in a representative and universal statement. In fact, it could be a story told by a father to a child as the child grows up, of how he migrated to a different country, left his roots behind, brought his wife (the child's mother) to the new land and gradually settled. It has been recognized as the story of Lahiri's parents, her own diasporic origins, thus a kind of beginning for her own fictionalized autobiographical stories. What needs to be further noticed is the manner in which this story connects in a flowing narrative to other stories in the collection. For example, 'When Mr Pirzada came to Dine' and 'Mrs Sen's' could be seen as a continuation of the parent's story as they settle into American lifestyle, yet retain their Bengali roots. The first of these stories introduces the child's eye perspective (the author as a child) into the narrative. I see it as a subtle fictional introduction of the author into the text. One can notice the formative second-generation immigrant child's experience as she sees the story told by her father in 'The Third and Final Continent' continue. The wide-eyed culture shock settles and the Bengali couple (the child's parents) get used to American life. At the same time, they maintain their own culture rhythm, seeking compatriots (Mr Pirzada), follow socio-political upheavals and partition pangs in the subcontinent from neutral territory. All along, the child grows into American culture, studies American history, American geography, participates in Halloween rituals, but is acutely conscious of a difference in her own roots through her awareness of her parents' other parallel life. Lahiri's own childhood is reflected in Lilia's narration. To take the metaphor

further, one could look at 'Mrs Sen's'. This could easily be a continuation of Mala's story of her adjustment spilling over from 'The Third and Final Continent'. Mrs Sen is still living another rhythm of life, following another calendar of rituals belonging to the land from which she hails. She follows another food cycle with her Bengali obsession with fresh fish. It is very difficult for her to adjust to American lifestyle. Finally, she even rejects the freedom that driving can afford, and the change in pace that it could introduce into her life. Yet she symbolizes the mother figure so central in Bengali culture, and with her innate motherly affection, reaches out far deeper into the innocent heart of the American Elliot than his own mother, who has other priorities into which she fits Elliot.

'Sexy' and 'A Temporary Affair' move deeper into the stories of second-generation Bengali men and women as they grow into a different culture. This age group is closer to the author's own age group and thus, can be read as a continuation from the child narrator persona to a distant third person narration of major cross-cultural (culture clash) and adjustment issues that young Indians face. These young Indians, like the author, are far more American than Bengali (than their parents), yet India exists somewhere in their maps as a point of reference that keeps on coming. Identity has to be defined, values reorganized, and it is a precarious balancing act. Though these stories are openly fictional in style, the autobiographical imperative is very strong in the issues being objectively (only in style) explored. In 'A Temporary Affair', Shukumar's laid back easy going lifestyle (very Indian?) is in stark contrast to Shobha's very American mechanized routine that leaves little time for leisure and introspection. The baby metaphorically would have been (is) a symbol of domestic involvement and family ties. Shobha's involvement with her work at one level is a kind of escape from the mental depression that the loss of the baby would have wreaked on her. At another level, it is the takeover of the American way of life as a counterfoil to the excessive domestic involvement of Indian womanhood. Is Shukumar's refusal to get into the flow of American professional life a deep Indian resistance? The drifting apart is circumstantial and implicit in such a situation. The forced togetherness in the power cut situation throws these various tensions into sharp focus. For Lahiri, these conflicts and tensions are not mere fiction. They are part of her own situational exploration—metaphors and fictions of the self.

Similarly, in 'Sexy', questions of marriage, loyalty, fidelity, extramarital relationships, are explored both from gender-specific



and culture-specific points of view. The American lifestyle, with its emphasis on individuality and privacy, allows for casual flings in a way which the fundamental Indian culture with its family-oriented values does not. This could create serious disturbances in relationships, as the backdrop story of Lakshmi's cousin emphasizes. This cousin's trauma and the child's confused situation is to highlight this crisis. But the foreground story of Dev and Miranda, without passing any moral value judgement, explores the beauty of an extramarital relationship in the face of sneaking infidelity. Looming disturbingly in the back of her mind is Miranda's full scale realization of Lakshmi's cousin's trauma. The two stories taken up, in a way, continue the cross-cultural conflict that is very much a part of Lahiri's own experience of second generation Bengali youth in the US.

In theatre, where the singular narrative voice disappears into the various voices of the numerous characters, discovering the autobiographical imperative becomes a tougher proposition. In a collection of short stories, one can connect the various and separate narrative strands to visualize the implicit authorial connecting narrative that I have tried to show through Lahiri's work. But theatre, with its emphasis on character conflict, dialogues and action, fractures the singularity of any authorial voice (hidden or otherwise) into a kind of creative multiplicity (unless it is the Shavian kind of theatre or the propagandist or pamphlet plays. But interestingly, contemporary theatre has been experimenting with subtle narrative strategies that learn from the relationship between autobiography, fiction and subjective narrative poetry. Never has the use of the singular narrative voice (through the *sutradhara* or through subtler means) been used in more exciting ways than in today's theatre. Mahesh Dattani's (2000) 'Dance like a Man' and 'Twinkle Tara' are two plays that can be used as examples. 'Twinkle Tara' begins with the single narrative voice of the narrator/writer Chandan before bodying forth into the drama of characters, obviously born from the fictionalized author's personal concerns. He says it in so many words that it is based on memory and remembering the past. But the past in a play, as Chandan realizes, is different from the past in a poem. In a poem, emotions of the past are recollected in a singular mental tranquility or agitation. In a play, that past has to be touched 'like a live wire' electric and alive in its multi-voiced reality. Of the several indicators, the dedication to his parents in his *Collected Plays* subtly voices the author's personal concerns shared between parents and son and sharply focussed maybe in 'Dance like a Man': 'For my

parents Guju and Wagh: "Look I am dancing like a man". Technically, the narrative coalesces, collapses the past and present by separating and simultaneously bringing together the three generations, traditional rituals and contemporaneity, framing changes and conflicts, tensions and breaking points, and yet an underlining continuity. Lata fits into the mould of young Ratna (her mother in the past) and old Ratna (the present of the plot). Young Jairaj and Viswas are interchangeable, as is an old Jairaj with Amritlal (his own father). This kind of telescoping, for reasons of economy in theatre, here assumes a philosophical dimension of continuity amidst discord. Conflicts/tensions within a joint family structure; the younger generation trying to break out into unconventional areas and ways of life; patriarchal hegemony and the tensions it creates; gender issues seen both from the male and female perspectives; all these sub-plots form the basic fabric of the plays mentioned. It could easily be a dramatized exploration through a more personal, autobiographical (not in the factual sense) hidden subtext. (a) The conflict inherent in a life dedicated to the performing arts (the dance metaphor could very well have been theatre) clashing with the responsibility of continuing the family business; or (b) the tension about who assumes domestic responsibilities in a situation where both wife and husband are involved in performing arts (and if it is an art like dance that is traditionally more a female domain), are of immense, widespread and general importance in today's middle class Indian society. But we cannot forget Dattani's own situation as a performing artist, playwright, director, and the possibility of a break with family norms. However mild or serious the personal tension might have been, this dedication does have that tone of thrown challenge of the 'look ma, no hands' variety. If 'Twinkle Tara' exposes the bad deal women get in a male-dominated society (the shared leg goes to the male of the twins), 'Dance like a Man' would be about the bad deal a sensitive male can get when he breaks the male chauvinistic ring and enters unconventional areas of self expression, or professions. Somewhere in Chandan's situation in 'Tara' lies the clue to Dattani's own gender perspective, where like Rahel and Estha in *The God of Small Things*, Chandan and Tara are twins in whom the male female separateness does not exist: 'Like we have always been. Inseparable. The way we started in life. Two lives in one body, in one comfortable womb'. In *The God of Small Things*: 'Esthappen and Rahel thought of themselves together as Me, and separately, individually as We or Us'. That is: 'till we were forced out' ('Twinkle Tara'). Social forces

cruelly separate them, bringing tragedy. In *Twinkle Tara*, they are separated and Chandan gets the better deal, while Tara slowly dies. In *The God of Small Things*, similarly, adult manipulations destroy childhood innocence: 'now she thinks of Estha and Rahel as Them... Edges, Borders, Boundaries, Brinks, Limits, have appeared like a team of trolls in their separate horizons'. Unlike fiction where the single narrative voice (or experimentally a few more) would dominate, theatre has to give voice to everyone. But it is interesting to note how underlying the multiplicity of voices is the new experimental playwright's (like Dattani's) effort to jog memory, personal experience and thinking and then 'relive that charge (of the live wire) over and over again', in its full dialogic vibrancy.

When we come to a book of poems, we are confronted by an apparent absence of a narrative. The poems appear as self-contained pieces that could stand on their own in any anthology where other poets feature as well. But it might be a good idea to ask some pertinent questions. What are the criteria for the selection of poems within a book of poems? Why are they arranged in a certain order, and not in any other? Does the title of the book hold them together? What is the implicit connection that justifies this title? Is there a hidden and silent narrative that connects poem to poem? Is it left to the readers' strategies to empathize and get into the hints and suggestions that lie secretly embedded in the text that holds the book together? It is with these questions in mind that I will be examining Agha Shahid Ali's *The Half Inch Himalayas* to reconstruct the poet's story (biography of a different kind) as I read.

Agha Shahid Ali's (1987) *The Half Inch Himalayas* is divided into four prominent sections, each dealing with a certain segment of the life of the poet, and the poems that feature within these sections carry the essence of that section's major concerns within them. The first section deals with ancestral past in the typical autobiographical beginning. Parents, grandparents, great grandparents feature as sharply etched portraits delineating cultural symbols that the poet inherits—some accepted proudly, some critically, some rejected: a white turban, the Koran... inscriptions in Arabic' are associated with the poet's great great grandfather in cryptic epithets admiringly. But the great grandfather, 'a sahib in breeches', is 'simply dissappoint(ing)'. Grandfather, 'a handsome boy... smoking hashish... reciting verses of Sufi mystics' has a tragic heroic touch. Father with the Colonial debonair look, knowledge of Lenin and Beethoven, is seen critically, 'loses me as he turns to Gandhi'. But the women

ancestors are all seen with great admiration and sympathy, more than the men, revealing the poet's sympathy to gender issues. While grandfather 'thumbed through Plato... his inheritance lost/his house/taken away', grandmother 'worked hard/harder than a man'. She inherited the beauty of the 'Dacca gauzes', later torn into handkerchiefs, 'distributed among nieces and daughters-in-law/ Those too lost now'. Enscenced in the rich ancestral past of "brocade, silver dust,... quilt studded with pieces of mirror,... prayer rugs, ... Mecca scarlet woven/with minarets of gold", it is only natural that there will be a sense of exile as the poet moves to Delhi and then on to US and the cities of the modern world: 'for wherever I seat myself, I die in exile'. But before moving into that, I would like to comment on a unique technique that the poet uses as a kind of double narrative, holding simultaneously two or more time frames together. For example, in 'Lost Memory of Delhi', the poet reconstructs the time of his parents' initial days after their marriage as they move like lovers through certain landmark Delhi sites. But the poet is present in their present. He is older than his father was at that time: 'he is younger than I'. At the same time 'I am not born'. Yet he quietly witnesses the fateful 'night of my being' that even his own parents, lost in their embrace, do not even know.

The second section is centred around Delhi and the poet's simultaneous awareness of the crass materialism; the vulgar side of contemporary life; and the remnants of cultural and literary landmarks in the strangest of places and circumstances. The Jama Masjid butcher even as 'he hacks/ the festival goats, throws their skin to the dogs' quotes Ghalib and Mir in the game of completing couplets. This is tradition alive in the midst of commerce and butchery. On a slightly different note, the pavement astrologer's strident warning 'pay, pay attention to the sky' rings out as wisdom amidst pollution and poverty. After watching Kuzintzev's King Lear with the Delhi intelligentsia, the poet is reminded of Zafar, the poet king who saw his sons hanged, died in exile in Burma 'begging for two yards of Delhi for burial'. Lear's cry 'you are men of stones' hauntingly echoes in the poet's mind, underlying the deep tragic essence that connects cultures and times even as surface superficiality, ugliness and vulgarity take over the life in a modern city. This section ends with a homage to Begum Akhtar and Faiz Ahmed Faiz, establishing the poet's deep-rooted affiliations that a city like Delhi cannot wipe out. It is this affiliation that makes the poet's own exile meaningful in such company: 'In the free verse/of another language I imprisoned/

each line—but I touched my own exile' (to Faiz) 'exiling you to cold mud/your coffin, stupid and white" (to Begum Akhtar). But this is only the beginning of the poet's sense of exile. Exile becomes the central metaphor of the book, as we shall see, with Virginia Woolf's lines (quoted earlier as well) assuming a sense of eerie truth in the poet's life; 'For wherever I seat myself/I die in exile'. This distance travelled by the poet in his journey away from his roots in Kashmir will only increase the sense of exile. Delhi is only one move away from those roots. But interestingly, the roots persist in insidious ways.

The third section is about the poet's move to America, furthering the metaphor of exile and simultaneously connecting it to the title of the book that holds all the sections together. Is it a wrong move, bringing a sense of emptiness and vacancy? 'A wrong turn brings me here'; the 'town's ghost station' (after the crowded stations of India); 'the dry well piled up with bones'; seems to suggest this. In this section, we find another interesting use of telescoping two narratives of two time and space zones in 'Vacating an Apartment' and 'Previous Occupant'. In the first one, the act of vacating the apartment is like vacating a previous identity as 'the storm troopers... efficient as fate... wipe my smile... burn my posters (India and heaven in flames)... whitewash my voice stains... make everything new... clean as death'. The death of an earlier identity is followed by the birth of a new identity. The next poem, 'Previous Occupant' underscores a similarity of fate undergone by the previous occupant of the new apartment that the poet is about to take over. This occupant 'who came from as far as Chile' has left behind (like the poet must have in the earlier poem) 'the stains of his thought' on the 'windows', 'the colour of his eyes... his shadow everywhere, his love for "Neruda, Cavafy".' Very smoothly the poet moves into the new apartment and the new identity as Neruda and Cavafy take over from Faiz and Ghalib. It is the subtlety of such experimental narrative techniques in poetry that make Ali such a fascinating poet. The American days are almost blurred in whiskey fuzziness of the 'midnight bars' and the 'melting rocks in my glass', as if to induce through intoxication a kind of forgetfulness that goes with tragic exile. Even the poet's identification is more with Latin America, as revealed in his love for the previous occupant who came from 'as far as Chile' as also in 'Flight from Houston'. Between Mexico and Pittsburgh, Houston balances the 'warm side of the sky, the sun / touched with Mexico' and the 'white (cold?) hills of Pittsburgh'. We must not forget the poet's own ambivalent relationship with his home, Kashmir,

ensconced in the cold white Himalayan ranges and yet beautiful and lush. In this state of exile, home 'shrinks into the mailbox' in the form of postcards 'a neat 4 by 6 inches'. The Himalayas shrink into 'half inch' postage stamps. 'Home', 'out of focus now', in 'memory' just an 'undeveloped giant negative'. Even as nostalgia, a very strong emotion in the poet of exile, make the waters of the Jhelum 'so brilliant', so 'ultramarine', the poet knows that in reality, it is far from that ideal and it is only an 'over exposed love' that is revealed in the picture. We can easily understand here the significance of the title of the book and also the organizing principle, as also the significance of the frame poem 'Postcards from Kashmir'.

The final section is the story of the survivor, the alien, the outsider. The poet becomes the alien who 'lives in my house... in my room... sits at my table... practicing my signature... wearing the cardigan/my mother knit for my return... the mirror gives up/my face to him... he calls to my mother in my voice'. Is this the new identity? But we know that the other self exists. Vulnerable, sensitive, it still dreams of return to the word that exists only in the past. The present is an emptiness, 'a ten-year-old movie ticket'... 'all empty, empty'. This is a tragic poetic narrative of exile, nostalgia and modern life. But the narrative strategies of the poet, as we see in Ali's case, are subtler, more implicit and hidden than either drama or fiction where the demands of the form make it more explicit and evident.

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## NOTES

1. Text of a talk delivered at the South Asia Centre, University of Heidelberg Germany. Titled "India and Europe", and included in *Yatra 1*. Reproduced as Nirmal Verma (2000) "India and Europe: Some Reflections on the Self and the Other" in Jain, Jasbir, ed. (2000).
2. Text of a talk delivered at 'Meet the Author' series (1996) and subsequently published in *Indian Literature*, Sahitya Akademy, This text is from: Jain, Jasbir, ed. (2000).
3. *India Ink*, New Delhi (1997).