

ABSTRACT

An Eternal Quest: The Search for Self in  
the Novels of Mulk Raj Anand, P.K. Narayan,  
Raja Rao, and Salman Rushdie.

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Mulk Raj Anand (1905-), P.K. Narayan (1907-), Raja Rao (1909-) and Salman Rushdie (1947-), are interpreters of twentieth century Indian experience. They share the commonality of language, history and colonial experience which has helped shape the physical and psychological landscape of India. These writers employ an Indian form of English to give voice to the spiritual and secular concerns of their society and through their fiction they contribute to a continuing and eternal quest - the search for self.

The philosophical quest finds expression in Anand's fiction through his search for a humanistic ideal that makes the individual the author of his own destiny. Narayan and Rao tread a traditional Hindu path towards spiritual knowledge of the self whilst Rushdie in Midnight's Children, emphasises the importance of individual will in creating meaning out of life. It is not the purpose of this thesis to force the writers into a consonance of philosophical attitudes, nor to efface the obvious differences in style, perspective and theme between them. It is rather to examine how the writers pursue and give expression to these ideals which shape alternative and related

paths to the realisation of self.

These paths range from ideals of action based upon compassionate humanism, to the orthodox Hindu ideal of renunciation of worldly existence. In between these extremes of possibility there is the opportunity for pursuing spiritual evolution whilst detachedly fulfilling worldly obligations, which is the philosophical theme of both Narayan and Rao. Unlike Anand, Narayan and Rao who are octogenarians, Salman Rushdie belongs to India's post-independence generation. As can be expected, then he shares few of their concerns and ideals. Compared with them, Pushdie is an iconoclast. He does not offer the piety of Rao and Narayan. Though he is as secular as Anand, he does not exhibit the humanistic ardour of Anand. He takes an irreverent look at life about him and in questioning the very basis of selfhood he defines the possibilities of meaningful human action.

The order in which the writers are considered gives coherence to the developing argument that when reality is accepted, a socially active self is created to ameliorate man's moral and physical condition. Transcendence of reality sends the individual on a mission of ordering his inner universe, which in turn issues in an altered social existence. The effect in both cases is the same - the creation of a nobler ideal of man.