

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Let me put it briefly: were one to compare the forms of literature with sunlight refracted in a prism, the writings of the essayists would be the ultra-violet rays.

Georg Lukács

The essayistic project respects and enacts nothing less than the perspectivistic character of knowledge...The essay is the hermeneutic genre per excellence.

W. Wolfgang Holdheim

This thesis proposes to analyze the essay as a literary genre by focusing on the Indian English essay in reference to the selected texts by R. K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy. It attempts at partaking of the larger theoretical debate focused on the questions of generic identity and generic value of the essay through the adoption of a model of analysis marked by both diachronic and synchronic study. On a broader note, it tries to situate its interrogation of the essay in general and of the Indian English essay in particular against general theoretical issues of literary form, ideology and discourse. The principal points of focus are the analysis of the essay's status as a marginalized genre in the literary academy, the enquiry of the textual and discursive determinants behind such reception and an attempt at locating an alternative model of generic analysis for the essay. In the title of the thesis the essay has been referred to as "the fourth genre" following essay critic Claire de Obaldia who uses the term to encapsulate the essay's constant yet problematic existence alongside the three primary genres of fiction, poetry, and drama (Obaldia 5). The dichotomy between "genre" and "form" has been kept open in the title as a way of recognizing the most persistent challenge in the study of the essay between its problematic generic status and ambiguous formal identity. Working with a

consciousness of the major theoretical issues related to the study of the essay, this study tries to locate a systematic poetics uniquely suited to the genre.

1.1 The Essay in Perspective

Generic divisions have been an established and convenient strategy for exploring, analyzing and studying literature. They constitute one of the most basic approaches through which institutional courses introduce students to the field of literature or literary studies. Though on the surface level this approach seems to be marred by an intrinsically restrictive framework or standard it has survived because it helps to systematize and regularize the field of literary studies which otherwise looks bewilderingly varied, huge, and old. It also proves useful because it creates a semblance of a definition, a map to follow. That is why even after passing through diverse and complicated arguments and counterarguments for and against its value and meaning, genre or form has remained “indispensable in literary discourse” and this fact is proved by “the unceasing publication of books whose titles announce that they deal with tragedy, the lyric, pastoral, the novel or another of the many types and subtypes into which literature has over the centuries been classified” (Abrams and Harpham 122). However, there remains a fine but steady difference between studying literature in terms of genres and studying and analyzing the genres themselves as a system of categories or concepts. Once the orientation is thus focused, it becomes visible that genres are not simply used as a means for classifying literature; rather they are, at a deeper level, also used as a means of assigning standards to literary texts. It means that with the concept of any particular genre there remains attached a latent but unavoidable idea about its status as major or minor or as central or marginal. This unofficial but hierarchical division of genres on the axis of high and low on the one hand and centrality and marginality on the other, though apparently the legacy of a distant classical or neoclassical critical idiom, has continued to influence the approaches of academic analysis of particular genres. As Suzanne Ferguson comments in *Short Story Theory at a Crossroads*: “Like societies of people, the society of literary genres has its class system...It has its aristocracy, its middle class and its proletariats”

(176). Ferguson was discussing the status of the short story as a hitherto marginalized but gradually upcoming genre within the system of literary forms, but her idea is paradigmatic for all those genres which have been relegated to the margins of literary studies on the basis of a fixed concept of minority or secondariness. And of all such forms the essay remains one of the most neglected. A consistent lack of critical attention and academic recognition throughout history is the most obviously constant factor about this form and it has been relegated to the periphery of literary studies to an extent where it has remained, what Graham Good calls, “the invisible genre in literature, commonly used but rarely analyzed in itself” (*Observing Self*, ix).

It is important to notice that Good refers to the essay’s invisibility in terms of a lack or rarity of analysis, (he calls it “rarely *analyzed in itself*”), that is critical or academic analysis, and not creative practice. It is important to take note of this point because in reality the academic invisibility of the essay is most ironically contrasted by a consistently growing creative visibility of the genre that has made the situation all the more intriguing. Essay critics are acutely conscious that a strange discrepancy has consistently existed between what Claire de Obaldia calls “the great number of prestigious essayists produced by any one country and the number of existing studies on the genre in that country and everywhere else” (60). The same concern is echoed by Chris Anderson’s comment about how “the essay as a form has declined in the academic world, even as it has gained popularity outside the academic world” (“Hearsay Evidence,” 300). Indeed, if attention is shifted from the essay’s present neglect in the literary academy to the conditions of its development through history, the essay comes up as a form with the most extraordinary capacity of adaptation and survival. Though its status and popularity has gone through rough tides of high and low, the essay has never gone off the literary map in its six hundred years of visible history and has appeared within different historical, national and generic frameworks adapting its appearance and retaining its distinctive character in a fine balance. In other words, against all the claims of its minority, the history of the form proves that “The essay is not a sensitive species on the point of extinction. It is tough, infinitely adaptable and ubiquitous” (Hardison 11). This genre which started its journey from a single text that gave it its name—Montaigne’s

Essais— has created vibrant traditions of its own in countries like Germany, Spain, England, Canada, America, Latin America, Japan, China and many more,¹ has transcended disciplinary boundaries to appear within fields as divergent as philosophy and journalism and, in the most recent phase of its development, has entered the fields of cinema, painting and photography altering the very nature of its textuality. On the creative side the essay's scope and variety has covered such a wide arena that essay critics who take up its study in the present times have to except the fact, as Graham Good categorically states, that “no work on the essay should aim to be “exhaustive” (*Observing Self*, ix).

Such a consciousness regarding the potentialities of the essay triggered a whole new wave of renewed critical interest in the form in the western academy in the last three decades of the past century, with research works coming up that concentrated on finding a theoretical or philosophical framework for the form on the one hand and the analysis of individual works against that theoretical reference on the other. In the early part of the century what was available on the essay were significant but isolated critical pieces like George Lukács' “On the Nature and Form of the Essay” (1911) and Theodor Adorno's “The Essay as Form” (1958) and some historical studies of the essay (especially the English essay) like *The Great English Essayists* (1909) by Wiliam Dowson, *The English Essayists* (1946) by Bonamy Dobree, and *The English Essay and Essayists* (1959) by Hugh Walker etc. The nineteen eighties saw, for the first time, the publications of some very significant book length studies on the form including Reda Bensmaia's *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text* (1987), Graham Good's *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay* (1988), *Essays on the Essay: Redefining the Genre* (1989) edited by Alexander J. Butrym and *Literary Nonfiction: Theory, Criticism, Pedagogy* (1989) edited by Chris Anderson. Following this, a wave of critical output on the essay in the forms of books and scholarly articles on the form emanated in the Western academy and has continued since then. The list includes *Estranging the Familiar: Towards a Revitalized Critical Writing* (1992) by G. Douglas Atkins, *The Politics of the Essay: Feminist Perspectives* (1993), edited by Ruth-Ellen Joers and Elizabeth Mittman, *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism and the Essay* (1994) by Claire de

Obaldia, *Traversing the Democratic Borders of the Essay* (2002) by Cristina Kirklighter, *Tracing the Essay: Through Experience to Truth* (2005) by G. Douglas Atkins, *The American Protest Essay and National Belonging: Addressing Division* (2007) by Brian Norman, *The Made-Up Self: Impersonation in the Personal Essay* (2009) by Carl H. Klaus, *On the Familiar Essay: Challenging Academic Orthodoxies* (2009) by G. Douglas Atkins, *The American Essay in the American Century* (2010) by Ned Stuckey-French and *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to Our Times* (2012) edited by Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French. Taken together, these studies provided an unprecedented array of perspectives on the form and its potentialities set against different literary, cultural and national frameworks. Besides, a range of scholarly articles were published in journals like *Comparative Literature Studies*, *College English*, *College Composition and Communication*, *Prose Studies* and others. All these studies created a new foundation for analyzing the hitherto neglected form of the essay by reiterating that “it is undoubtedly, a respectable area for scholarly exploration” (Haefner, “Introduction” 204).

It is important to add, however, that this development, actually, was a part of a comparatively recent line of change in the study of literary genres and their nature within the system of literature. Within traditions of literary criticism (till before the coming in of “Theory” in the 1960s), literary types were treated almost like independent, neatly divided, a priori available containers into which the literary content could be poured. The study and analysis of genres was either completely formal— related to the formal features and their interrelations —or nominally contextual in the cases of “major” literary genres like the Novel. The questions of socio-political determination, cultural politics, and most importantly the possibility of latent presence of discursive structures were restricted to the subject matter or what is commonly understood as the thematic level of the literary works, the forms being considered the innocent recipients of these complicated political nuances. (Within New criticism or Practical criticism, for example, consideration of social background or context will amount to a “fallacy”). Now, in the recent times, the study of genres has turned into one of the most theoretical fields of literary studies. It has come to acquire a lot of trends that places it, at times, at the other extreme from where the old concept of literary genres stood. Of these developments two

are remarkable. Firstly, the concept of genre has come to be inseparably related to and defined by the historicity of the development of thought in general, philosophical and otherwise. This has completely done away with the myth of neutrality or innocence of genres and has given rise to the belief in their essentially political, contextually determined character and in the resultant implications. This has fixed the concept of genre in historicity leading to the realization that there is a need to focus on what can be called “a historical sociology of literary forms and functions” (Bennet 78). As Georg Lukács puts it:

The forms of the artistic genres are not arbitrary. On the contrary, they grow out of the concrete determinacy of the particular social and historical conditions. Their character, their peculiarity is determined by their capacity to give expression to the essential features of the given socio-historical phase. (qtd in Bennet 79).

At the most recent and developed stage this line of analysis has led to a concept of the genres which accepts that though genres are definitely formulaic and conventional in character, they are instrumental and active in generating structures of knowledge and effects of truth or reality and in providing frameworks within which meaning is structured. It is believed, in other words, that instead of being simple formal structures genres “contribute to the social structuring of meaning” (Frow 2).

The second development which has come up as a result of this trend is crucial in renewing and enriching the study of literary studies. This is the levelling of the hierarchical structure which was, and in some cases still is, the most commonly followed one in the study of the genres. The concept of genres divided in major and minor categories, a legacy of the neo critical age in particular and of the liberal humanist paradigm in general, has given way to a democratic and reflexive tendency whereby previously marginalized genres have been put under scrutiny and have been studied in relation to the historical specifics which defined their character and structured their development. This line of criticism stresses the fact that most of these genres are not

minor because of scarcity of specimens, in fact most of them were or are as widely practiced and read as any other major genre, rather than the idea of “minority” itself is an effect created through the politics of canonicity and literary value. The focus is directed at the historical and ideological constructedness of these otherwise naturalized concepts leading to the realization that, as Terry Eagleton said, “the so called ‘literary canon’, the unquestioned ‘great tradition’ . . . has to be recognized as a construct, fashioned by particular people for particular reasons at a certain time” (10). As a consequence, there appears a drive towards broadening the boundaries of the literary canon by relativizing the very ideas of major and minor and towards emphasizing the need to study the categories, forms and writers hitherto considered minor. As Marilyn Butler puts it with pure common sense in her attempt for an “Open Literary History”: “How can you operate the techniques for telling who a major writer is, if you don’t know what a minor one looks like?” (25).

As a result of this tendency towards broadening the boundaries of literary studies, the move has arisen to redefine genres as categories with blurred and common edges sharing complex but inherent interrelationships, rather than categorizing them as pure and absolute givens. This works as a reaction against the traditional idea of a genre as a category clearly and consistently identifiable from other genres by the presence of a static group of qualities. The emphasis is more on the possibilities and implications of those areas where generic qualities and functions mingle. As John A. McCarthy puts it:

The debate within the literary Academy over the past few decades regarding the nature of literary and generic studies has taught us to be weary of thinking too strictly in terms of traditional or finely profiled genres. Within each so-called genre there are possibilities of wider divergences from the ideal norm. (57)

It is very important to remember that the rise and apparent logicity of this whole process of reorienting the study of genres—especially of the ones hitherto neglected—has not been able to reverse the established literary standards in the academy completely

because these in their turn are extremely powerful and rooted. But it has proved to be an important tributary to the deeper stream of all-round theoretical reorientation that has influenced literary studies in the recent decades and has led to an encouraging trend of bringing many formerly marginalized genres into focus, following which areas like Children's Literature and Travel Writing have already received systematic and comprehensive academic attention. The study of the essay as form has proved one of the most challenging of these new research interests.

It is against such a steady development of criticism on the essay as form that the possibility of studying the Indian English essay might be considered. Indian Writing in English has become an established area of literary and cultural interest in the international academic arena by this time and it has created a niche for itself both in the international market in terms of popular readership and in academic circles in terms of theoretical research. However, academic attention has not been equally distributed amongst all the forms in which Indian Writing in English has manifested itself. It is mainly Indian English poetry and novel which have received the major share of the academic attention within and outside India, drama securing a comparatively secondary but steadily highlighted area. This has resulted in a kind of centralized academic interest in these forms and consequently has led to the marginalization of other genres of Indian Writing in English to a great extent. However following the current resurgence of academic interest in formerly marginalized areas fields like Indian English Children's Fiction and Indian English Travel Writing have started coming under theoretical analysis so that it seems timely to focus attention on the hitherto uncharted territory of the Indian English essay against the wider backdrop of the steadily developing field of criticism on the essay as form. Finding a history of the form and studying individual essayists might be two interrelated but distinctive routes to follow in such analysis. This study attempts to study the character, significances and relevance of the essay form as practiced by R. K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh, and Arundhati Roy. However, such an attempt needs to be set against the wider background of analysis related to the nature, identity, function and potentialities specific to the essay as a distinctive genre and to such concerns this study shall now turn.

1.2 Locating the Essay: Definition and Status

Formulating a definition that can incorporate the unique and individual identity of a genre always proves to be a problematic issue because genres, with all their distinctive and differentiating traits, are categories with “frustratingly blurred edges” (Obaldia1). But even then working definitions for almost all literary genres have been available in academic studies that guide readers and researchers into finding a comfortable beginning point for further analysis. In case of the essay, however, definition is not simply a point of introduction it is rather the most problematic of the nuances of the form to be handled. Attempts at finding a definition of the essay or understanding it as a distinctive form of writing has been such a preoccupying concern for essay critics that by this time “a virtual subgenre exists of essays on the essay”² (Atkins, *Estranging* 19).

Ironically enough, the point on which most of the attempted definitions of the essay agree is the fact that it can not be defined. It is a kind of “definite indefiniteness” that most essay critics seem to accept and also stress as the essay’s distinguishing mark. The expression of this peculiar position takes different shapes. At times it leads to clear and unambiguous acceptance of the difficulty; as in John A. McCarthy’s comment that “the essay is perhaps the most indeterminate and elusive mode of writing to confront the literary historian and theorist” (27) or in G. Douglas Atkins’ generalization that the very form of the essay “represents an implicit critique of the drive toward definition” (*Estranging* 5). At other times the same idea manifests in the form of metaphors devised to represent both the peculiarity of the essay’s nature and the definitional difficulty related to it. Terms like “a brief baggy monster” by Geoffrey Hartmen, (“English”, 44) “greased pig” by Edward Hoagland (25), or “Protean genre” by Alexander Butrym (11), used to refer to the essay, are examples of this trend. In both cases, however, there lies an underlying sense of mingled fascination and frustration related to the task of finding an appropriate definition for the form. It is as if the effort of defining the essay “is analogous to trying to catch a wriggling fish in the open hand” (McCarthy 27).

The root of the problem lies not in the approaches of study but in the history of the essay. Finding a definition for any genre is, after all, an inductive process and is dictated by the available evidences of the form in its various manifestations existing through history. In case of the essay it proves an extremely difficult route to follow because the term “essay” has a history of the most varied usage possible. And to make it more problematic many of these usages have been different to the point of being contradictory. If John Locke’s book length esoteric study of philosophy in prose and Alexander Pope’s speculative verse composition are both called “Essay on Human Understanding” and “Essay on Man” respectively, then Joseph Addison and Richard Steele’s short ironic sketch like pieces on humble matters are also called “periodical essays”. If on the one hand Montaigne’s model of subjective and spontaneous essays is considered the original manifestation of the form on the other hand every school going kid is taught to write something called the model “five paragraph essay” which looks like an exact opposite of the former in its planned and prescriptive shape.

Because of this kind of “indiscriminate use as a term” (Chadbourne 134) the essay has come to acquire an overall impression of a casual and inconsequential category that “connotes without denoting” (Butrym 2) and has been given the same place within the generic system that the category “miscellaneous has in budgeting” (Hardison 13). In other words, essay has come to be seen as a mixed and confused category of writing and hence is hardly defined as a genre with any distinguishable individual characteristics. But more importantly it has led to the emergence of a confused muddle of concepts surrounding the essay that has turned definition of the form into a near irresolvable problem. It takes the shape of a vicious circle that Paul Hernadi referred to in relation to the form of tragedy but is more aptly applicable to the essay: "How can I identify tragedy (or any other genre) before I know on which works to base the definition, yet how can I know on which works to base the definition before I have defined tragedy?"(4)

One major reason behind such a difficulty is the fact that “the essay is not genetically pure” (McCarthy 28), that is the essay refuses to demarcate any category of thematic interest or what can be called “subject matter” as its area and thereby goes against one of

the most basic criteria that decides genre distinction. Interestingly enough this “lack”, if it can be called so, has two sides to its reception. On the creative side outside the academy, the essay’s refusal to be demarcated by a specific range of subject matters has been turned into a defining characteristic by practicing essayists and it has also been indirectly celebrated as its potential for a kind of freedom unavailable in other genres. When in 1922 in “The Modern Essay” Virginia Woolf commented ³ that the essay “can be serious and trifling, about God and Spinoza, or about turtles and Cheapside” (41), her comment had carried a tone of praise that was echoed almost a century later in Susan Sontag’s comment in her introduction to *The Best American Essays 1992* when she categorically stated:

An essay is not an article, not a meditation, not a book review, not a memoir, not a disquisition, not a diatribe, not a shaggy dog story, not a monologue, not a travel narrative, not a suite of aphorisms, not an elegy, not a piece of reportage, not a----

No, an essay can be any or several of the above. (xiii)

However this eulogistic defense by essayists has not been able to save the essay from being downgraded inside the literary academy. By academic standards the essay’s lack of thematic specification has been considered an irredeemable loose end that keeps the form deprived of a generic status. The fact that “the range of topics available to the essay is potentially infinite” Claire de Obaldia points out, “subverts the principle according to which a genre designates certain kinds of material as acceptable while excluding others” and the result of this subversion within a traditional academic set up turns out to be a condition where “the very word ‘essay’ disorients the reader’s horizon of expectations” (2).

This disorientation is aggravated by the essay’s capacity and tendency to attach freely with the thematic and stylistic traits specific to other genres and disciplines. *Encyclopedia of the Essay*, for example, lists subcategories like “historical essay”, “philosophical essay”, “sociological essay”, “medical essay”, “nature essay” and “science essay” which,

for an average reader of literature, do not seem to have anything in common other than the word essay. It appears all the more confusing because it connotes that the essay has a peculiar capacity of mingling freely with all these different subjects and still retaining its own identity, of remaining an essay. Moreover the range of subjects or disciplines the essay associates with seems to be indefinite and also beyond any scheme or hierarchy. The history of the essay, for example, reveals the form's close association with journalism on the one hand and philosophy on the other and makes it impossible to identify any specific pattern in the essay's association with other genres. Besides moving freely in the thematic areas specific to different genres the essay also accommodates the stylistic or modal qualities related with them and can become "descriptive like the narrative, intense like the drama, or magical like the lyric poem" (McCarthy 28). In one of the earliest and most detailed synchronic study of the essay as form, *Elements of the Essay*, Carl H. Klaus described the essential quality of the essay as "persuasion" by saying that "all essays have a persuasive purpose, for they are, after all views". But beyond this essential core, Klaus went on to point out, the essay has the quality of taking in the modes of expression that belong to other forms because of which the essay as a form "is not confined to the form of straightforward persuasion; it may also be narrative, or dramatic, or poetic in form. Or an essay may involve a combination of forms" (5). Klaus' reference to the essay's unconfined character implies a flexibility that can be seen as a rare virtue on the creative side. But it "scatters the essay so broadly" that on the side of academic study it makes the essay a form only "marginally effective as literature" (Butrym 2).

Because it seems practically impossible to define the essay as a form by content specification, attempts are made to analyze it on the level of style. Here some fruitful formulations seem possible as the very term essay in its etymological origin contains an implicit but unavoidable stylistic orientation. The term *essay* is seen originating⁴ in the French terms *essai* and *essayer* meaning "to attempt" or "to try out". On a more distant point of its etymological history the essay is seen originating in Latin *exagium* meaning "weighing", that is analyzing, inspecting or judging from different angles. If this route of explanation is followed then the essay becomes a type of writing defined and directed not

by any particular content category but by the approach that is adopted in analyzing and presenting that content. And the possibility arises that analysis of the underlying implications of this side of the essay's character might lead to the essential core, if any, of the essay as form.

Now, associating the essay's form with the concept of an attempt might have several levels of implications. On the level of scope it implies a certain degree of incompleteness or fragmentariness stopping short of a complete or exhaustive analysis. On the level of treatment it might imply an attitude of tentativeness with a consequent tendency towards avoiding rigor or system. And on the level of expression or tone it carries a sense of informality that stands away from specialized or disciplinary jargon. Besides it will also indicate the incidental but commonly found physical quality of shortness in terms of length. Taken together all these create an image of a piece of writing that is unspecialized, tentative, informal and amateurish. Graham Good's exploration of the implications related with the term essay is most exhaustive:

The term also frequently connotes a certain quality of approach to a topic, variously characterized as provisional and exploratory, rather than systematic and definitive. The essay can be contrasted with the academic article, which is usually a contribution to a recognized discipline and to a collaborative inquiry, previous inquiries being taken account of by means of quotations and footnotes. The essay tends to be personal rather than collaborative in its approach, and usually lacks this kind of scholarly apparatus. The essayist's authority is not based on formal credentials or academic expertise, but on his or her personality as reflected in the style of writing. Persuasiveness is based on distinctiveness of style rather than on the use of unaccepted professional or technical vocabulary. The essay typically eschews specialized jargon and is addressed to the "general

reader” in a friendly, informal tone. It also avoids the application of pre-established methodology to particular cases, but rather works from the particular toward the general, and even then is not concerned to produce conclusions applicable to other cases. Its concerns are personal and particular, more than professional and systematic. (Preface)

Undoubtedly, this is an impressive working definition that accommodates the basic qualities related with the idea of the essay. However, the problem with this kind of a definition and its related implications is that they do not stop at the level of a neutral formulation of the essay’s nature. By way of logical development they lead to a framework of analysis where these defining qualities acquire their meaning and significance through a relationship of difference and absence. At this level the entire enterprise of defining the essay in terms of its inherent stylistic qualities acquires a negative definitive orientation where the essay is understood in terms of what it is not more than what it is. When analyzed keenly Good’s definition also signals the presence of such a scheme underneath the otherwise sincere attempt at capturing the essay’s elusive nature; the insistent presence of the phrase “rather than” works as a marker of this stand. There are clear and persistent binaries where the essay is marked by a sense of absence: the essay is provisional (not systematic), exploratory (not definitive), personal (not professional), informal (not specialized) etc. Consequently the qualities implying fragmentariness, tentativeness or informality acquire their defining significance as the opposite or “Other” of completeness, certainty or formality and by way of implication the essay gets defined as the “Other” of categories of writing that exhibit these qualities either on the physical or the conceptual level.

Now, this axis of difference or otherness on which the essay is placed in relation to other categories of writing or formal structures operate at different levels. At the most basic level a direct contrast is set up between the article and the essay in terms of a supposedly existing opposition between academic and creative standards, but more in terms of the

essay's lack of a formal or systematic orientation. On another level the term essay is used to mark a contrast with the idea of a treatise in terms of a lack of exhaustiveness or completeness. While commenting on the nature of his book *Literature*, for example, Peter Widdowson modestly clarifies that despite its having the physical shape of a book he would "prefer to think of the study as an essay" because it does not meet "all the promise of authority and definiteness that *big books* tend to convey" and remains only "an attempt, a try, a tentative effort" (1). As a natural corollary to this idea of essay as "non-book" sometimes short compositions of entirely different nature like dialogue, letter, preface, sketch review etc. are all subsumed under the title "essay" so that essay as a term becomes an indefinite "catch-all for non-fictional prose works of limited length (Klaus, "Elements" 4). However, the most important level in the development of this image of the essay as form is the one where the essay's lack of definiteness (both in terms of subject matter and style), completion or formal rigor are seen as marking an alternative generic status altogether. At this level the essay is considered to be an essentially "anti-systematic" category, a kind of "anti-genre" (Klaus and Stuckey-French xviii) breaking free of the very concept of system—generic and otherwise—by defying restrictions on subject matter or style.

The essay's "otherness", if it can be called so, naturally raises questions regarding its source and that is most commonly located in the principle of the "self" or "personality". That is the flexibility, freedom or informality associated with the essay is ultimately located in the personality of the essayist and is seen coming from the freedom of the self. At this stage the aforementioned binaries highlighting the essay become manifestations of a paradigmatic binary between the essay as a free and flexible creative space on the one hand and any kind of systematized, rigorous or impersonal category of thought or expression on the other. In the elaborate definition of the essay by Graham Good mentioned earlier for example such a scheme might be seen where the concept of personality underlies all the other qualities distinguishing the essay's form. This view gathers its support from the fact that Montaigne, the supposed father of the form, had equated his essays with his persona and after that, throughout history, the essay has always been a form of writing dominated by a personal element in some form or other.

The problem with this view is that when developed further it turns the essay into a kind of “intellectual refuge, a domain sacred to the freedom of the mind itself” and come to represent “the ultimate yearning of the essayists to be free from any systematized form of thinking or writing” (Klaus and Stuckey-French xxi). Consequently it becomes just another step in retaining the axis of otherness placing the subjective character of the essay against all types of academic writing and their impersonal objectivity.

Understanding the dynamics of these definitional frameworks is important because here the problem of definition gets connected with another crucial problem—that of the essay’s academic status. It is not difficult to see that if the essay’s flexibility and variability is defined negatively as being anti-systematic, indefinite, unspecialized or unprofessional than it amounts to posing the form as a direct contrast to qualities and forms academically recognized, to turning it into an academic or generic “other” and that implies keeping it on the margins of academic recognition. Consequently it is realized that “if essay’s first problem is lack of clear definition, its second is such lack of status” (Butrym 4). This is a highly complex situation where on the one hand the arguments in favor of the essay’s essentially variable and flexible nature are proved true by the history of the form and on the other hand recognizing the form by those very qualities leaves it marginalized within academic modes of analysis. Moreover there remains the peculiar dilemma of the same traits being received differently within and outside the academy and assessed differently by critical and creative standards.

Definition of the essay, then, remains surrounded by an array of questions which have continued to confound and intrigue the essay critics at the same time. A crucial concern in the debate is the question of denominating the essay as a literary category. The variety and expanse of the essay is such that many a times, especially when mapping its history, it is felt as if “there is no essay but only essays, as many essays as there are essayists” (Obaldia1). But, at the same time, for the purpose of discussion and analysis it becomes unavoidable to bestow some designation on the essay and in such cases it has been commonly considered to be a type or category of literature alongside others; in books on literary types, for example, the essay is generally found sharing space with poetry, drama,

the novel, the short story etc. However, the question of a taxonomic designation proves crucial for studies focused on the essay in particular because, as we have seen, absence of the same have negatively contributed to the essay's academic marginalization.

The basic question here is can the essay be called a genre? If not, what other designatory marker should be applied for categorizing it? If we do a survey of how the essay has been named within essay criticism, we see two categories coming up: "genre" and "form". For example, the essay is consistently referred to as a form by both Georg Lukács in *Soul and Form* and Theodore Adorno in "The Essay as Form"; Gerhard Haas calls it a "literary form", as was mentioned earlier, as does Edward W. Said who calls it a "radically skeptical form" (*The World* 26). At the same time, there are other critics who call the essay a genre. Roland Barthes called it an "ambiguous genre" (qtd in Bensmaïa viii), Alexander Butrym calls it a "Protean genre" (11), Claire de Obaldia calls it a genre throughout her book *The Essayistic Spirit*, as does Réda Bensmaïa in *The Barthes Effect: The Essay as Reflective Text*. More intriguing is the fact that many renowned essay critics refer to the essay as both a form and a genre. To take a few examples, Graham Good, in his seminal book *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, calls the essay "the invisible genre of literature" (ix) and also refers to as a "minor form" (179); in *The Hermeneutic Mode*, W. Wolfgang Holdheim calls the essay "the form of the problematical" (21) and also "the hermeneutic genre per excellence" (30); Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French calls it both a "heretical form" (xviii) and a genre (xii) in their book *Essayists on the Essay*. In all these examples, the assignment of the form/genre labels to the essay seem to be plainly descriptive; though they are not haphazard, they do not seem to be based on any methodical or theoretical choice either. What seems to be needed, here, is a comparative understanding of the labels "genre" and "form".

When we try to assess genre and form side by side, it becomes apparent that the unspecialized use of the terms to denominate the essay is actually a reflection of a broader and more commonly encountered overlapping. It refers to the common usage which has made both genre and form denotative, especially in literature, of "types", "categories" or "class". Though it may look like as if this would be restricted to very

general or preliminary levels of literary study, instances prove otherwise. The use of the labels of genre and form in the same denotative sense can be found even in specialized studies dealing with these very concepts. For Example, both Heather Dubrow and John Frow use the terms genre and form to refer to literary types in their books *Genre* (1982) and *Genre* (2006) respectively. Though a little confusing and in need of deeper inspection, the overlapping between genre and form can not be rejected outright as wrong for the simple reason that both genre and form are, beyond doubt, taxonomic concepts; both of them are related to “classification”. When we mention “a genre” or “a form”, it is always and already placed in a scheme, conceptual or existing, of other “genres” or “forms”. It seems to be unavoidable, hence, that both of them share, at times, a common conceptual ground. However, the acceptance of such shared conceptual space makes it all the more necessary to analyze the nature and scope of the connection between the two entities, the first requirement of which is the analysis of the concepts themselves.

At the most basic level, “genre”, in literature, refers to the idea of a class or category of texts which share a common range of thematic choices supported by a range of shared stylistic attributes; the epic or the novel are classic examples. “Form”, on the other hand, has two levels of connotation. At the primary level “form” is an attribute rather than any class or type; form connotes structure or shape; in a literary work form is “the principle that determines how a work is ordered and organized” (Abrams and Harpham 113). In this sense form is subsumed within genres insofar as genres are accompanied by different forms or organizational principles. Taking clue from this, at another level, form is sometimes used in literary classification to denote those types which are defined by their formal or structural principle rather than theme or orientation; the sonnet or the ballad are examples. In such scheme of classification, prose, poetry and drama will also fall under “form”. In common usage genre is generally considered broader, flexible and more numerous than forms which are thought to be plain, relatively static and few. In a description like “romantic film”, for example, romantic will be considered the genre and film will be the form; romantic can have different connotations, different constitutive elements and can also be in different forms like romantic novel or romantic poetry.

There are, however, problems with such simplistic models of literary classification as well with any watertight compartmentalization between genre and form. The most obvious problem is the instability of such rigorous models. Literary texts, types and their interconnections are too conceptual to be completely and permanently schematized so that overlapping becomes unavoidable. For example, the novel, the novella and the short story will have to be called genres if the aforementioned basic definition of genre is followed, and yet, the distinguishing mark differentiating them from one another is the variation in their length which is a purely structural/formal element. Another serious problem with this kind of a concept is the unavoidable construction of a hierarchy amongst literary types. The belief that certain literary types are to be called only “forms” (not genres) because their formal shape is their identifying mark, creates an aura of utter simplicity around those types which then automatically pushes them to a lower rank. Moreover, the very idea that any literary type can be simple and straightforward enough to be completely represented by a static and fixed structural orientation is misleading. Every literary category comes to existence and continues to develop through very complex interplay of textual and discursive forces. Even if structural/formal uniqueness seems to be the most distinguishing mark of a literary type, that does not necessarily negate the presence of a socio-historical and discursive determinants.

The solution seems to lie in emphasizing a model of analysis which pays due attention to this complex, evolutionary and, more importantly, discursive-ideological nature of all literary types and makes use of the concepts of genre and form as conceptual categories working simultaneously rather than as axiomatic groups of literary types which exclude each other. In fact, the concept that genres, forms or any literary type belonging therein is static and can be identified or located simply on the basis of a theme-structure compliance is a legacy of the Aristotelian division of literary kinds which continued only till the eighteenth century manifesting in the neo-classical ideal of a hierarchical scheme of pure genres guided by the principle of “decorum”. In modern criticism, critical analysis of the issue of literary classification has been mainly centered round the concept of genre as a principle rather than a standard of classification. There have been, of course, attempts at conceptualizing genre in terms of comparison with systems: Northop Frye’s

archetypal scheme of four major genres based on the systems of the natural seasons and the application of Ludwig Wittgenstein's concept of family resemblances to explain relation between genres are examples of such attempts. The whole Formalist-Structuralist line of genre study also reflects another attempt at securing a stable and synchronic generic scheme based on linguistic determinants.

What all these theories have been able to provide are different and probable ways of gauging the concept of genre, proving, in the process, the near impossibility of encapsulating genre and literary classification in any one fixed scheme. The result has been the realization that genre is a concept far deeper than simply literary and far complex than simply definitional. In such a connotation where genre is finally accepted to be a "universal dimension of textuality" (Frow 2), the complexity of genre is finally ascribed to its embedment in social and discursive structures of signification rather than plain, static and neutral elements of form and structure. It leads to the acceptance that "genres are facts of culture which can only with difficulty be mapped onto facts of nature" (53), and turns into a conviction that "an adequate description of genre will involve...a historical poetics, in which the structural components of genre are taken to be historically specific rather than obeying a purely formal logic" (68).

Within this dynamic view of genre the idea of an exclusive binary division of literature into major genres and minor forms seems to turn redundant. It provides, rather, a framework for identifying unique generic particulars of all literary types with form as one crucial constitutive element. It explains why, for example, John Frow studies the apparently simplistic types of the riddle and the sonnet—both of which will fall under the category of literary form by traditional standards—as genres in his book *Genre* (2005). For the essay, this new mode of conceptualizing generic identity of literary types may prove a turning point. As we saw, the traditional views on the essay have concentrated on the physical/structural side of it as its distinguishing marker; essay's shortness, simplicity and its formless form have come to distinguish it as a type. As the physical attributes, in the case of the essay, seem to be essentially and characteristically limited and plain, the essay as a literary type has been thought to be share that status. At

the same time, the still lingering concept of generic purity has found the essay falling short of a generic identity marked by a supposedly stable model of theme-style compliance. However, a shift in the perspective on genre, like the one already discussed, may provide the much needed framework to study the essay as a genre.

The solution seems to lie in placing the essay within an analytical framework not only descriptive but causal in nature. That is there has to be search for a poetics that not only tries to describe what the essay is or is not but attempts to analyze and explain the reasons—socio-historical and otherwise—that has gone into making the form what it is. The fact that the essay proves to be a challenge to any attempt of definition is obvious. A poetics that can do justice to the uniqueness of the form has to be one that can maintain a balance between recognizing the form’s extraordinary variety and essential flexibility on the one hand and locating a core underlying that variety on the other. The most common route leading to a possible poetics of this sort is to go back to the form’s point of origin and undertaking a search for the conditions of its being. In the essay’s case it implies going back to the “father”—Montaigne.

1.3 The Essay in Context: Search for a Poetics

In their preface to a recent collection, interestingly titled *Essayists on the Essay: Montaigne to our Times*, Carl H. Klaus and Ned Stuckey-French laments the fact that even after almost six hundred years of traceable history and uninterrupted existence on the literary map, the essay, “has yet to find its Aristotle” and is still waiting for a “collective poetics” (xv) and comments on the absence, need, and desirability of “research and commentary” that might lead to “a poetics and analytics of the essay”. It is not difficult to understand that by “poetics” French and Klaus imply the concept of a framework of systematic analysis “concerned with the nature and significance of the genre” (xii). In other words, a poetics is expected to offer two basic things to the form that it supports: analysis of its distinctive character as a form and defense of its significance based on that distinctiveness. The first of these involves an in-depth understanding of the identity of the form in its basic and individual character as

developed through history and as manifested in its different instances. The second element of defense tries to understand the intrinsic value or significance of the form in terms of the functions, both creative and ideological, that it serves. However none of these two elements can be completely grasped unless they are approached through what Graham Good calls a “historico-philosophical” perspective because forms or genres themselves are categories caused and shaped by historicity (*Observing Self*, vii). As Keith Fort puts it: “Forms do not exist in a vacuum any more than do ideas. Forms evolve to meet deep human needs that are in turn shaped by historical and personal situations” (629). A poetics for the essay as genre, hence, has the prerequisite of understanding it through an analysis of the historical specifics that shaped it.

Search for the roots of the essay lands in an interesting and ironical paradox. The origins⁵ of this form that has bewildered readers and critics alike with its multiplicity of appearances and its apparently unmappable scope can be comfortably located in a single text and in a single author—Michel de Montaigne’s *Essais* written in Renaissance France. Apparently there is hardly any other form or genre which can claim to have such an obvious and uncluttered point of origin in history. As Gerhard Haas remarks: “Scarcely any other literary form is traceable with as much precision back to its beginnings, yet scarcely any other form defies so obstinately as the essay definition or even description.” (qtd in McCarthy 27). This “beginning” of the form—if it can be called so—is made all the more intriguing by the fact that it was being denoted by a term that originally stood not for any piece of writing but for a mental activity. (*essai* in French, like *essay* in English meant “to try”, “to weigh” etc.) It leads us to enquire about what Montaigne connoted by that name and what was the historical significance of that process of naming.

It is significant that though it has become customary to refer to the individual sections in Montaigne’s book as “essays”—a usage that carries the sense of a short but autonomous topical piece countable in terms of being a single unit of writing, the sense in which the term has come to refer to a genre in the modern times—Montaigne himself never used the term in that sense. Rather he used the conventional term “Chapters” to refer to the individual sections and called the whole book his *Essais*. The essay, for Montaigne,

hence, was not an organizing unit; rather it referred to the method or more appropriately the approach that was characteristic of the whole book as a work as well as to the spirit of the enterprise of which the book was the result. In his connotative use of the term Montaigne was following his times because in the sixteenth century the term *essai* was not used to refer to any textual unit but carried the sense of attempt, trial, test, etc that meant a process rather than a product. In other words Montaigne used the term *essai* not “as a generic concept but as a structural or methodological principle in keeping with the etymological meaning” (Obaldia 29). In a broader sense, in fact, as Ulrich Langer points out, each individual chapter in Montaigne’s *Essais* can be seen as accommodating several essays — “several instances in which Montaigne tries out his judgment” (3). At the same time, he was entirely innovative in calling his book *Essais* because before him the term had never been used to name a body of writing or a textual product of any kind.

For Montaigne, the decision to use the term *Essais* to name his writings and to shape them in the “tentative and groping” spirit of an attempt, trial or experiment was a crucial and innovative “methodological choice” (Kauffmann 224). Here the element of “choice” implies a kind of freedom for Montaigne in deciding among different methodological orientations available to him and Montaigne used that freedom to shape the *Essais* as a form of writing different from the already established forms of disciplinary prose existing in his times. Thus his *Essais* were written neither in the form of a treatise, nor a commentary, nor a dialogue. What is more interesting is that contrary to the prevalent idea of Montaigne writing the *Essais* without any serious or planned intention—an idea fostered by the writer’s own ironic self deprecating tone found in his work — he actually was extremely conscious and proud of the novelty and originality of his work. At the same time he had a clear sense of purpose in fashioning the *Essais* and defended its form in terms of a broad philosophical significance. This is how he declares his project and its significance in Chapter 2 of Book 3 of the *Essais* titled “Of Repentance”:

Others form man; I tell of him and portray a particular one,
very ill- formed . . .

Now the lines of my painting do not go astray, though they change and vary. The world is but a perennial movement. All things in it are in constant motion . . . Stability itself is nothing but a more languid motion . . .

I can not keep my subject still . . . I take it in this condition . . . I do not portray being: I portray passing. Not the passing from one age to another, or, as people say from seven years to seven years but from day to day, from minute to minute. My history needs to be adapted to the moment . . . So all in all, I may indeed contradict myself now and then; but truth, as Demades said, I do not contradict. If my mind could gain a firm footing, I would not make essays, I would make decisions; but it is always in apprenticeship and on trial . . .

I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter. You can tie up all moral philosophy with a common and private life just as well as a life of richer stuff. Each man bears the entire form of man's estate . . .

Authors communicate with the people by some special extrinsic mark. I am the first to do so by my entire being, as Michel de Montaigne, nor as a grammarian or a poet or a jurist. If the world complains that I speak too much of myself, I complain that it does not even think of itself . . .

At least I have one thing according to the rules: that no man ever treated a subject he knew and understood better than I do the subject I have undertaken: and that in this I am the most learned man alive. Secondly, that no man ever penetrated more deeply into his material . . . To

accomplish it, I need only bring it to fidelity; and that is in it, as sincere and pure as can be found . . . (610-20).

Erich Aurebach notes that “the structure of the thought” in this passage is so “precise and logical” that it seems rendered “in the form of a syllogism” (14). That is because in this passage Montaigne is already putting forward what can be called a “poetics” of the new form he was practicing in so far as he is mentioning its characteristic traits and, more importantly, is providing an explanatory framework justifying its nature. Through a closely knit argument Montaigne seems to identify three aspects that distinguish his work. First is the *method* of his work which involves the exposition of his “being”, that is his self, in his writing as the central interest and he stresses the fact that this exposition has to be “entire”. Second is the *form* of his writing which “change and vary” because though it is his “being” that is involved, what he portrays is its “passing...from minute to minute”. And third is the *theme* of his work which is nothing but “a humble and inglorious life”. The presence of these characteristics is simultaneously defended by broader philosophical, moral and logical standards.

However, there are two other sides to this defense that lie obliquely within the argument. First is the strong and unavoidable presence of the consciousness about the uniqueness and novelty of the whole project of the *Essais*: Montaigne’s consciousness that he was “the first” to shape a work the way he did and that “no man ever” had done that before him binds the whole argument with “an amazingly frank and clear and emphatic underlining of the uniqueness of his book” (Aurebach 28). This consciousness is emboldened by a frame of reference where the essay’s unique identity as a never before attempted form is highlighted against standards of difference in a way so that “the contrast ‘I—the others . . . can not be missed and stand out more sharply in each rereading of the passage” (24). At every step either directly or indirectly the essay’s qualities are set against something related to it by absence, as in “others form the man; I tell of him . . .”, or “I do not portray being, I portray passing”, “I set forth a humble and inglorious life; that does not matter” etc. The insistent recurring of this structure leaves no doubt that this element of difference or otherness, for Montaigne, was at the core of

the *Essais* as a form as he practiced it and that he judged the value of his form by this element of unique difference. Hence it becomes crucial to understand the structures or systems against which Montaigne's essays were defined and from which he differentiated his *Essais* so emphatically.

Broadly, the criterion of difference marking the essay as form can be seen functioning at three distinct but interrelated levels; those of rhetorical, philosophical and historico-cultural discursive systems. On the level of rhetoric, the Montaignian essay appeared as an exact contrast to the form of the Latin *Dispositio* which was the standard prose form for philosophical and oratorical discourse in the Renaissance. The *Dispositio* consisted of a strictly laid out five step method of speculative argumentation: *exordium* (introduction of the subject), *narratio* (explanation of the question), *confirmatio* (discussion of favorable arguments), *refutatio* (dismantling of opposing argument) and *peroratio* (the final and logical conclusion covering the main points of the argument) (Kirklighter 18). Like the essay, a *Dispositio* was short and could accommodate any subject from any discipline, but unlike the essay it had a rigorous, rigid and prescriptive structure. As the essay was defined by Montaigne by its mode of trial, chance, change and by its spirit of personal engagement, a *Dispositio* was defined by the exact opposite qualities of plan, system, logicity and formality. In Montaigne's time the model of *Dispositio* followed and taught as a part of standard upper class education was the one perfected by Cicero and Montaigne had acquired a good knowledge of it through his classical education. Besides the standard *Dispositio* Ciceronian prose as a category, considered very highly in the academies in the Renaissance, was marked by an extreme of artful perfection in terms of both sentence pattern and overall structure. Montaigne playfully parodied and then debunked the form of the *Dispositio* in some of his essays like "A Consideration Upon Cicero" and "Of Friendship". It is easy to see that in shaping the *Essais* Montaigne carefully avoided and dismantled all patterns suggested by Ciceronian rhetoric.

It is important to understand that for Montaigne the *Essais'* shift away from the prescriptions of traditional rhetoric was not simply a question of accepting or negating one type of aesthetic arrangement over another. The difference of his *Essais* from the

Dispositio and the unique shape it acquired through that difference was crucial for him because he knew that a particular rhetorical framework is always dictated by and reflective of a corresponding and underlying doctrinal discourse. The realization that “doctrine and rhetoric naturally go together as traditional matter and manner” made Montaigne give his essays a kind of shape where his “neglect of doctrine harmonizes with his neglect of rhetoric” (Good, *Observing Self* 32). The stylistic effects of qualities like closure and formality that Montaigne so thoroughly discredited were understood as outer manifestations of a particular philosophical orientation or system of thought from which the *Essais* had to be distanced. And this leads us to the second level of Montaigne’s poetics of difference for the essay as a form.

The system or standard against which Montaigne obliquely but so thoroughly shaped the *Essais* was nothing but the organized and long established academic tradition of medieval scholastic philosophy. As Ian Mclean points out Scholasticism in Europe developed as a system that followed the principles of categorization and hierarchy in organizing knowledge into well knit units separate from each other. Following the Aristotelian classification of knowledge demarcation was made between “speculative thinking (sciences)” on the one hand and “goal-oriented disciplines (arts)” on the other subsequently leading to the establishment of a hierarchy “setting the former above the latter” and also “a clear hierarchy inside both domains”. The sciences included metaphysics, logic, mathematics etc. which were distinguished by their “objective fixedness and reliability” and by the fact that their subject matters were “the most universal and most certain” whereas the arts (subjects like ethics, politics, law and medicine) had only “conjectural knowledge” and hence were considered lower (145). In “Of the Education of Children” Montaigne declared his ignorance of any methodological study of the scholastic disciplines:

“For to sum up, I know that there is such a thing as medicine, jurisprudence, four parts in mathematics, and roughly what they aim at But as for plunging in deeper, or gnawing my nails over the study of Aristotle, monarch of modern learning, or stubbornly pursuing some part

of knowledge, I have never done it; nor is there any of which I could sketch the outlines.” (106-07)

This claim of ignorance was nothing but a veiled indifference and a mode of dissociation on Montaigne’s part that finally materialized in his shaping the *Essais* as a form outside and beyond the categories of systematized knowledge prescribed by scholastic philosophy. The essay derived its identity as a form through a sharp and clear relationship of difference with the most powerful discourse of its time, that of Scholasticism. As Kurt Spellmeyer declares : “If the essay as a distinct genre begins with Montaigne, it also begins as an assault upon Scholasticism” (253). The form of the Montaignian essay then was “programmatically unphilosophical” (Maclean 143). It implies the extremely significant presence of a thorough purposefulness in the very roots of the essay as form as Montaigne planned it in contrast to the widely held popular image of the form as inherently haphazard, inconsistent and hence inconsequential. It becomes important here to understand the nature of that purpose.

What Montaigne aimed at resisting through his *Essais*, in both the *Dispositio* in terms of rhetorical structure and Scholasticism in terms of philosophy, was a rigidly axiomatic concept of knowledge expressed through an inflexible model of supposed completeness and perfection which was inherently based on irreversible compartmentalization and hierarchization of phenomena. For Montaigne, this was an over-simplistic and dogmatic structure of cognition that fell short of understanding the inherent complexity, variety and interconnectedness of all elements in the universe. Instead Montaigne came to recognize the reality and supremacy of “experience” in all its irreducible contradictions and variability. Experience was also the concrete and real substitute for the predominantly abstract orientation of scholastic inquiry of which Montaigne grew impatient. At the same time influenced by Pyrrhonian skepticism⁶ he came to emphasize the impossibility of ever encompassing experience, reality or knowledge in totality by any system. In other words Montaigne aimed at a relativism against the absoluteness of Scholasticism. And his essays were the textual site where this process took place thematically and stylistically. He created the *Essais* challenging what Thomas Newkirk calls the “most

basic beliefs of the academic specialists of his day” and negating their idea that “the world consisted of fixed entities that can be named and categorized with precision” (qtd. in Heilker, *The Essay* 18).

Posed against this wider philosophical background all the visible characteristics of the essay like its shortness, looseness and indefiniteness in terms of subject matter, unspecialized informal tone and subjective involvement etc. become the defining elements of an alternative or rather reformatory epistemological stand on knowledge and life. As Maclean states, Montaigne consistently followed his plan of writing “not impersonally but personally, not comprehensively but partially and inconsistently, not supra-temporally but consciously immersed in the passage of time” and he continued to rely “on an unsystematic mixture of anecdote, quotation, and moral reflection” (143), that left an impression of a “very unphilosophical manner of expression and textual development” (144). However, when seen against the backdrop of the specific socio-temporal milieu from which Montaigne and his text emerged, it is revealed that this alternative philosophical stance was a part of a wider discursive reorientation. And this leads us to the third stage of the poetics explaining the essay’s nature.

At this stage the deepest roots of the essay as a form has to be located in the Renaissance both as a cultural and a discursive context. On the surface level the Renaissance indicates the advent of revolutionary innovations on the material plane including printing, the mariners compass, the telescope etc. and wider changes in astronomical and geographical spheres like the introduction of the Copernican system and the discovery of the New World. On a deeper level, however, it indicates an intellectual movement marked by a tendency towards interrogation, exploration and innovation. The distinctive aspect characterizing this period both on the cultural and discursive levels was, what Michael L. Hall calls the “Renaissance idea of Discovery” (73). Hall reiterates that the “idea” of discovery has to be understood as different from and wider than the physical discoveries made during the period. The “idea of discovery”, unique to the Renaissance as a phase of civilization was a spirit or “mode of thought and discourse” that was marked by the “examination of received opinion” (74). And the essay as a new and distinct form

developed as a strong textual manifestation of this discourse because it was “particularly suited to the examination of conventional wisdom . . . and the discovery of new ideas and insights” (78).

The implications of the claims that Hall makes for the essay’s birth are crucial because they turn the form into a kind of subversive counter-discourse with the potentiality of challenging and resisting the claims of what Floyd Gray calls “the criterion of authority” and turns, in its inventor’s hands, into “a complex, highly individual confrontation with the accumulated literary, cultural, ethical past and present” (273). The vehicle that Montaigne used very innovatively to materialize this process of confrontation and challenge of the discourse of authority and to relativize the latter’s absolutist claims to knowledge was nothing but the presentation of his own self as the embodiment of an independent and interrogating individual consciousness. It is important to emphasize the actual ideological and discursive significance of this element of individuality and subjectivity in the poetics of the essay because this element has remained a central mark of identity for the form as well as a cause for its persistent academic denigration after Montaigne. So it is important to understand that when Montaigne declared that in his essays he communicates by his “entire being, as Michel de Montaigne”, he was not simply making a statement about a rhetorical strategy or even a philosophical orientation, he was heralding the beginning of a new discursive structure where “against systematic impersonality” of previous conventions, would be introduced the “central position of author as speaker, at once subject and object in discourse” (Spellmeyer 254).

It is also interesting to note that in reality Montaigne’s innovation of the essay was not a completely new invention but was the result of gradual development from those very forms which it later subverted. The collection of sayings and quotations by classical masters on particular subjects was a common way of accumulation and preservation of knowledge in the Renaissance and Montaigne’s early essays started in that model. But gradually his personal commentary over things he recorded overcame the records he made. As Rosalie Colie points out though Montaigne began with the aim of shaping the essays as “carefully selected adages”, gradually the shape changed and “his powerful

personality soon swamped such objective aims” (qtd in Good, *Observing Self* 1). The result was the unique form of the essay as we know it today, the result of “the gradual personalization of an impersonal form” (Grey 272).

Establishing a definitive connection between the essay form and Montaigne’s practice may seem to run the danger, as Joel Haefner cautions, of sealing the dynamism of the form in an essentialist trope of origins (Haefner, “Unfathering” 259). However, the significance and unavoidability of Montaigne for finding a poetics of the essay lies more in the consciousness he showed in understanding the latent discursive potentialities of the form than in his supposed fatherhood. It means that though assigning Montaigne with an actual birth of the form may amount to restricting the possibilities of its origins and development, locating the first awareness of the form’s uniqueness as a mode of discourse in Montaigne is both just and inescapable. What Montaigne provided, for the first time in the history of the form, was a philosophy that underlies and binds its extremely elusive character. If a poetics is conceived as an explanative framework within which the distinctive identity, value and function of a form can be placed, then Montaigne’s practice of essaying comes up as the first instance of such a poetics of the essay. More importantly, Montaigne’s practice of the essay provided the form with a much needed defense by philosophically justifying its otherwise misunderstood qualities.

However, it is the question of the essays’ generic status that receives the most significant insight from this analysis of the origin of the essay as a literary type. Montaigne’s example reveals the ideological orientation and discursive power which was infused into the essay’s conception and which has continued to mark it as a distinct literary type. In other words, it provides a generic philosophy for the essay’s form. It is important, here, to clarify that in Montaigne’s scheme or design of the essay as a distinct genre, the element of form is, in fact, the most crucial one. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, Montaigne understood form as a highly ideological force and consequently shaped his *Essais* as a counter-ideological text simply by inverting the power of form into an apparent lack of it. The result is that the widely underrated formlessness of the essay turns, very subtly, into an overarching principle of form as such and the essay evolves,

from a being a type marked by a haphazard formlessness, into being “the genre per excellence, whose method is its form” (McCarthy 27).

The Essay, then, is a genre that challenges the very idea of generic identity through its form. The result is that the essay eludes—by conscious design and not by accident—the prescriptive and fixed denotative idea of a genre and rises above it to pose, “quite deliberately” as an “anti-genre designed to flaunt prescriptiveness in literary matters” (Holdheim 20). It is a paradoxical principle essential to the essay as a genre which has disguised its characteristic formal subversiveness as an innocent lack of formal stability resulting in a supposed absence of any generic identity. As John Synder points out:

But the defining trait of the essay taken as a genre is its traitlessness. . . from Cicero to Montaigne and Rousseau, from Emerson to Nietzsche, the essay has traced out its eccentrically positive yet diffident ideology of critical absence. The program represented by the essay has something to do with freedom from generic limits, with an unboundedness sufficient to justify treating the essay as a nongeneric genre—or “nongenre”.(12)

In other words, the essay exhibits an alternative generic identity which, by turning it into an “anti-genre” or “nongenre”, finally elevates it to “the matrix of all generic possibilities” (Bensmaia 92).

1.4 Towards Broader Significances

In his *Plato and Platonism*, Walter Pater identified the spirit of the essay with that of the Platonic Dialogue in terms of a dialectic and interrogative ethos that expresses itself as a “many sided but hesitant consciousness of truth”. As if completing a circle of thought, Pater further claimed that if on the one hand the essay is comparable to one of the oldest forms of philosophical speculations — Plato’s Dialogues — then it also proves to be “the strictly appropriate form of our modern philosophical literature” on the other because it is

the form of the essay which embodies the “relative or modern spirit” born in the Renaissance (30). Though locating the essay’s roots in Montaigne may create the impression that the form’s core is very distant in terms of historical, temporal and cultural significance, Pater’s claims for the essay can be seen as the beginning of a renewed understanding of the potentiality of the form in the broadest sense possible making it relevant especially for the contemporary times. The essay has suffered marginalization for a long time because its deep philosophical purposefulness has been undermined and its exterior shape, which is nothing but the vehicle for its formal philosophy, has been focused on and has been misunderstood as the form itself. The kind of defense that Pater provided comes up as an explanatory framework that undoubtedly saves the essay from sinking on the margins of literary studies and places it almost at the center of not only literature but of development of modern knowledge as a whole.

This kind of a philosophical orientation towards studying the essay has given rise to broadening the form into a mode of speculation that can be related to other genres of writing. Two such examples can be located in recent literary studies. Firstly, there is the concept of “essayism” enumerated by Robert Atwan in his article “Essayism”. He elaborates it in the following manner:

I want, however, to look at the essay in an altogether different way, not as a separate genre represented by a number of important works that we call "essays," but rather as a genre operating within the genres, one that has since the Renaissance continuously permeated and shaped what we normally think of as imaginative literature A history of essayism as opposed to that of the essay would include a large number of imaginative works of literature in which the essay or various essayistic styles of discourse are wholly dominant or at least so pervasive that they are difficult to ignore. . . (6-7).

Atwan locates this quality of essayism in texts like *Hamlet*, *Tom Jones*, *Tristram Shandy*, Walt Whitman's *Song of Myself*, Marcel Proust's *Remembrance of Things Past* and Milan Kundera's *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*. He stresses the point that the essayistic elements contained in such works as these are not parasitical or accidental to the main text, rather they represent compositional features that are intrinsic to the structure and meaning of the text. Very often the element of essayism inside works of fiction function in a conflictual or oppositional manner that may be read, as in Fielding or Kundera, as an analogue of other contentions (thematic, psychological, ideological) within the story. We can remember Kundera's reference to the "new art of the specifically novelistic essay" in his *The Art of the Novel* (65). A slightly different but related and equally broad concept that has emerged from the nature of the essay is the "essayistic". Claire de Obaldia, in her *The Essayistic Spirit*, tries to define this tendency in literary texts in particular and in thought and knowledge in general as a quality or tendency that transcends the boundaries of the essay as a piece of writing or even as a genre, and permeates texts and discourses of all category, including literature. Her concept, as she enumerates, draws on the outlines of the Bakhtinian concept of the Novelistic, and she locates it mainly in Borges and Barthes, after tracing its beginning in Montaigne.

From the current discussion on locating a poetics of the essay, it becomes clear that assessment of the essay's relevance and value depends on the standards of judgment used. Traditional criticism of the essay has, mostly commonly, worked through a descriptive framework which naturally makes assessment of the form in negative terms of absence turning it into the inferior "other" of established major genres. However, as has been seen, if the essay is analyzed in terms of the discursive functions it is capable of performing as a form within literary and cultural modes of signification, then an entirely new set of suppositions regarding its distinctive generic potentiality and value come to the fore. It is the adoption of this second framework that has led to the rise of an extraordinarily rich array of theorization on the genre in the Western academy in the past few decades. More importantly, as has been mentioned, in the most recent phase this enterprise of re-reading and re-locating the form of the essay has shown a marked

tendency of shifting away from its original focus on the Anglo-American manifestations of the genre to reach out to essay traditions existing within other national-literary frameworks.

The presence of such an armature justifies the attempt at re-directing critical attention to the form within the otherwise well-attended field of Indian Writing in English—an attempt this study strives to make. There are three considerations that have influenced and guided this project. Firstly, this study has been prompted by an acute consciousness of the near complete absence of critical attention to the form of the Indian English essay in the academic mapping of Indian Writing in English in general (this can be seen as representation of the characteristic consciousness about the essay's overall academic marginalization — a consciousness that has initiated most of the recent studies on the genre worldwide) and also of the silent yet consistent presence of the form throughout the history of the literature. Secondly, the study has tried to assess the genre's potentiality in terms of respecting and accepting its unique characteristic variety and flexibility rather than trying to focus on any essentialized version and hence has brought the three most visible manifestations—familiar, narrative, and political essay—to critical focus. Thirdly, the study has selected and focused on the essays of R. K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy with an aim of highlighting the peculiar relational and relative generic bias that has most drastically affected the academic reception of the genre; relative and relational because the whole justification underlying the genre's marginalization stands on the concept of its secondariness in relation to and in comparison with other “major/primary” genres. The essay texts of these writers, who are otherwise recognized and categorized as major novelists, have been selected for study with an aim of bringing the mechanism of this marginalization to critical scrutiny.

It is also important to make a note, at this juncture, regarding an aspect which is significant in relation to the essay in general and to this study in particular; it is the relation and the distinction between the personal and the familiar subforms of the essay. This has remained a difficult and intriguing issue in essay criticism. Whereas both the personal essay and the familiar essay have surfaced as the most representative

manifestations of the essay on the one hand, finding a stable line of difference between the two forms has proved very difficult on the other. The presence of these two subforms is recognized consistently since Montaigne and Bacon, in the works of Addison and Steele, Hazlitt and Lamb, Emerson and Thoreau, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, E. B. White and many more well known essayists (Werner 1387). However, reaching a final and conclusive allotment of essays in the personal or the familiar category has remained problematic. In his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, Philip Lopate commented:

I have never seen a strong distinction drawn in print between the personal essay and the familiar essay; maybe they are identical twins, maybe close cousins. The difference, if there is any, is one of nuance, I suspect. The familiar essay values lightness of touch above all else; the personal essay, which need not be light, tends to put the writer's "I" or idiosyncratic angle at center stage. (xxiv)

Lopate seems to be accurate in his assessment that the two forms are as closely related as "identical twins" or "close cousins" sharing difference only of "nuance", because other critics are found expressing same views. However, that thin and nuanced line of difference is located, by each critic, with slight but significant variations. Where Lopate locates the difference mainly in the tone or treatment (idiosyncratic angle versus lightness of touch), Theresa Werner identifies it as one in subject matter, so that "where the familiar essay is characterized by its everyday subject matter, the personal essay is defined more by the personality of the writer, which takes precedence over subject" (1386). At the same time, the point of relation between the two forms is also treated with slight difference: where Lopate indicates the possibility of the personal essay sharing the lightness of tone characteristic of the familiar essay, Dan Roche finds the familiar essay characterized as much by its "lightness of tone" as by its capacity to present "a personality" (578) which is further echoed by Anne Fadiman's idea that the familiar essay is "a blend of narcissism and curiosity." The relationship between the personal

essay and the familiar essay, in the long run, proves to be of both intricate interconnection and shifting difference.

A way of assessing the connection and differentiation seems possible if the personal and the familiar are considered to be orientations or approaches influencing both the subject matter and treatment in essays, besides being denominated as identifiable, though not exclusive, categories. Allotment of individual essays to the respective categories of the familiar essay or the personal essay, then, is decided by the relative degree of presence of a particular element, familiar or personal. G. Douglas Atkins presents a scheme of such analysis where the difference between the familiar essay and the personal essay is seen as one between “the observing self” and “the self observed” (*Familiar Essay* 5). For Atkins, the personal essay is that manifestation where the “self” is the observed and analyzed reality, though that observation may be made in a familiar way and through familiar references; the familiar essay, on the other hand, is the one that focuses on the familiar world and its experiences using the “self”, or personality, as the medium of observation. The shift from the personal essay to the familiar essay is decided by “the degree to which the scale tips away from the perceiving self to the perceived world” (*Tracing the Essay* 61).

Atkins considers the familiar essay to be the more visible form of the two in the present and locates two basic markers for the form. The first is the title: most familiar essays, because their concern is the various aspects of familiar experience, includes “on” or “of” in their headings indicating “that they are about something”; the second is the motive: familiar essays talk about something only to relate it to broader and universal significance, striking a chord of familiarity in terms of common human experience so that it is actually “outside and other than the self, public rather than private, social or cultural instead of individual” (61). At the same time, Atkins emphasizes the presence of the personal or subjective element as the more crucial and decisive one of the two in terms of representing the essay in general as a literary type and asserts that “not all personal essays are familiar, although all familiar essays are personal” (*Familiar Essay* 5).

This study tries to maintain a continuous consciousness of the significance of the familiar and the personal aspects as the two most crucially representative attributes of the essay in general. Whereas the familiar essay has been analyzed as a form, the element of the personal has been treated as an integral part of the ideology of the form of the essay and, consequently, has been studied in relation to the individual texts and the writers. However, it also maintains its aim of interrogating the literary politics that imposes centralized or marginalized status on literary types and subtypes. Though the familiar essay is commonly seen as occupying a central position among various essay subtypes, critics have also pointed out the fact that such centrality itself is accepted only and specifically in relation to the Anglo-American tradition of essay writing and essay criticism. It has been argued that essay traditions and essay types other than the Anglo-Indian or the personal-familiar have to be brought under the fold of ongoing strands of essay criticism for it to become truly representative of the form of the essay as a whole (detailed discussion on this issue is incorporated in chapter 2, section 2.2.3). This study has included the sub forms of the narrative essay and the political essay, along with the familiar essay, as an attempt to meet this need and also to maintain a balance.

The thesis has been divided into six chapters; the current introductory chapter is followed by the second chapter titled “*Essaying the Essay: Theorizing the Form*” that includes a discussion of the problems related to the reception of the essay in the literary academy and an analysis of the theoretical postulations of the three major strands of essay criticism, namely German, Anglo-American and Latin American essay criticism, followed by a historical overview of the Indian English essay. The third chapter titled “*Essaying the Ordinary: The Familiar essays of R. K. Narayan*” analyzes a selection of Narayan’s essays with a reference to the ideological and formal significance underlying the form of the familiar essay on the one hand and with a focus on the marginalization of Narayan’s essays against the extraordinary academic reception of his novels on the other. Chapter four is titled “*Essaying Real Stories: The Narrative Essays of Amitav Ghosh*” and analyzes the form of the narrative essay as offering a dynamic space that transcends the categorization of the essay as an essentially nonfictional form in favor of a creative and ideological merging of the concepts of fact and fiction. Chapter five, titled “*Essaying*

Activism: The Political Essays of Arundhati Roy”, deals with the political activist essay as a form and as practiced by Arundhati Roy through a re-assessment of the very concept of the “political” as a discursive rather than simply thematic orientation. The sixth and concluding chapter tries to offer reflective insight on the problems raised initially in the thesis by way of drawing generalizations.

Overall, this study aims at offering an analysis of the essays of three most well-known Indian English writers against the background of a steady development of the field of essay criticism and in response to the need of situating the Indian English essay within the same. As a way of preparing the ground for such an analysis this study now turns to a discussion of the existing theorization on the form.