

CHAPTER TWO

ESSAYING THE ESSAY: THEORIZING THE FORM

“The drama or the epic might be called the active life of literature; the sonnet or the ode the contemplative life. The essay is the joke”: G.K. Chesterton lightheartedly commented in his preface to the *Essays of the Year 1931-32* (60). Chesterton’s comment had come as a way of illustrating St. Thomas Aquinas’ dictum that for both active and contemplative life relaxation is a must in the form of jokes and games. On the surface level Chesterton’s comment can be seen as a typical and yet intelligent representation of the essay’s position as a second rate form in the literary academy. It highlights the ever-present but never questioned traditional image of the essay as the category that finds its logic of existence in its being the subsidiary and secondary ‘Other’ to the mainstream “major” forms, the “joke” providing a harmless and relaxed alternative to the rigor and depth of the “active” and the “contemplative”. However, Chesterton did not realize the possibility of reading essay’s joke like status on another level of implication. He apparently remained unaware of the fact that encapsulating the essay’s nature and position in the image of a joke inadvertently but unavoidably points at the latent core of subversiveness that holds this form. A joke is an essentially subversive principle in that it refuses to belong to the status quo and undermines all standardization through a drastic and unexpected alteration in perspective. The essay’s identity and position as a form are also dictated by its relentless refusal to belong to any standard system because of which it remains “a heretical form of writing in the universe of discourse” (Klaus and Stuckey-French xviii). More importantly, this refusal lies at the very roots of the essay’s nature in so far as it was shaped by an ideological and discursive need of subversion felt at a particular point in the history of knowledge as has been explained in reference to Montaigne in the previous chapter.

However, the proposition about the essay’s subversive essence unavoidably leads to another series of problems. And this is regarding the accommodation of the form within

the academic and pedagogic paradigm. Locating the essay's genesis with Montaigne definitely provides the form with a specific philosophy of "radical otherness", but finding a place for that philosophy within the standard academic structure has remained a challenge for essay critics. The reason is not difficult to find. If by its very nature "essay opposes doctrines and disciplines, the organizing structures of academic knowledge", then it logically leads to its "neglect in the higher levels of academic literary system" (Good, *Observing Self* 4). The essay's academic position is entangled in a strange vicious circle where its traditional image and position of marginality has led to absence of academic research and analysis and this lack in its turn has contributed to strengthening the image of marginality even further. As was mentioned in the previous section, a consistent discrepancy has existed between the essay's status inside and outside the academy which has resulted in confusion and misunderstanding regarding the theoretical possibilities of the form. Hence, it becomes all the more necessary, in studying the essay, to focus on the existing and potential angles of theorization present in the form. Finding a secure and worthwhile place for the essay on academic grounds is inseparable from raising consciousness regarding the necessity and significance of locating a proper angle of criticism specially meant for the form.

2.1 The Essay in the Academy

While trying to analyze the cultural and intellectual mechanism that creates and maintains what is called "Literature", Peter Widdowson commented that ". . . while literature exists independently of criticism, 'Literature' is only created by criticism" (37). No other binary can possibly illuminate the essay's position in the literary academy better than the one between "literature" and "Literature". As a form of creative and also critical writing¹ the essay has existed in numerous manifestations and has been a visible part of literature, but throughout history its place in Literature—the canonical and central body of textual creativity recognized by academic standards—has been an issue of contention. And if Widdowson's comment is followed then a major reason of that seems to lie in the kinds

of critical evaluation bestowed on the form in the different periods of history of literary criticism.

Within the neo classical framework of criticism the essay was hardly visible as a genre. When Dr. Johnson's famously defined the essay as "A loose sally of the mind; an irregular indigested piece; not a regular and orderly composition" in his *Dictionary*, (qtd in Lynn 914) he actually expressed a paradigmatic value judgment on the form on behalf of the culture of his times. It is not difficult to see, as Steven Lynn points out, that in a literary and social culture "that valued success (over endeavor), regularity and method (over loose sallies), accomplishment (over trials), and the final (over the initial), the essay would appear always to be an inferior genre" (913). On the other hand the romantic view of literature found in the essay a model of its prized values of personal freedom and democratic humanism following which Hazlitt could confidently comment upon essay "as the best and most natural course of study" because it "plays the whole game of human life before us" and could also rate Montaigne's merit on the ground that in his essays he was "the first who had the courage to say as an author what he felt as a man" ("Periodical Essayists" 16-17). This emphasis on the "self" of the author— either as a unique spiritual entity (as in the Romantic period) or as shaped by society and culture (as in post-Romantic or Victorian period)—in evaluating a text dominated the beginnings of institutionalized study of modern vernacular literature and continued till the beginnings of the modern period. The essay conceived as the personal genre per excellence found a safe place in that framework of criticism. Graham Good points out:

The Study of modern literature (i.e. post classical vernacular literature) was first organized along national-historical lines...This idea dominated the nineteenth century, from Hazlitt's lecture series down to the twentieth century. The assumptions were historicist and the structure was sequential narrative; the objects so ordered were seen as "works" or "products" of the author's personality, his society and his age. The essay fared reasonably

well in this period, since it could be “personally” expressive as well as “historically” revealing. (*Observing Self* 178)

The essay’s visible neglect in the literary academy starts in the modern period. The values of impersonality, intellectualism and complexity that formed the core of a “modernist poetics” (179), as propounded by Eliot and Pound, developed into the organicist assumptions of the New Criticism. This new mode of literary evaluation valorized the image of an autonomous verbal artifact, complex yet uniquely unified and detached from personal or societal influence. It is easy to see that it was almost wholly opposite to the values that defined the essay as genre. As Ned Stuckey-French points out, besides contradicting the values of “detachment and obliqueness” of high modernist mode by stressing that it “speaks personally and out of a moment”, the essay also cut through the revered modernist ideals of purity and unity by posing as a “lower genre—mixed, messy and digressive”. At the same time it was also found to have a characteristic leaning towards the popular and the journalistic that shaped it as “a product of memory and reporting rather than imagination and intellect” and these led to the idea that “the essay was not modernist, neither could it be considered truly difficult and literary” (4). The chosen genre that was considered emblematic of the modernist values was the poem and as Graham Good points out “the overall tone was reverential before poetic works that were agreed to be truly great and little attention was spent on minor talents and minor forms like the essay” (Good, *Observing Self* 179). Though the New Critical or modernist mode did not last very long in the academy, the loss of place and attention that the essay suffered and the position of marginality to which it was pushed during this period were never recovered entirely after that.²

It was with the introduction of “Theory” in the 1960s that the academy experienced a near complete reversal of the conceptual framework on which its pedagogical practices were based. Though it manifested itself through various individual theories and influenced the entire field of the Humanities, the ideological core of this theoretical revolution — if it can be called so—was guided by a single impulse of “opposition to

inherited ways of thinking in all provinces of knowledge” because of which it tried to “undermine and subvert” what are considered “the foundational assumptions, concepts, procedures, and findings in traditional modes of discourse in Western civilization” (Abrams and Harpham 240). It is easy to see that this “deconstructive” ethos, in its tendency towards questioning and reverting traditional pedagogic categories would be expected to offer a friendlier reception to the essay’s essential subversiveness as a form because, as Gregory S. Jackson points out, a lot of precepts of contemporary literary theory clearly bear “an uncanny resemblance to the rhetorical and discursive conventions of the essay genre . . . both literary theory and the essay in the present day dismantle logical, temporal, and causal order, reject narrative closure, and posit the mediation of subjectivity as a constituent element of intellectual inquiry” (1028). The presence of this philosophical and discursive core of resemblance leads to the expectation about the possibility of finding a suitable academic anchorage for the essay within the deconstructive orientation of Theory and this expectation is accentuated when the essay as a form is seen as essentially and not selectively subversive. W. Wolfgang Holdheim, while exploring the nature of the essay as a form found what he called the “perspectivistic nature” to be its defining trait and located the same at the very roots of the form in Montaigne:

Clearly the essay is in its very essence the form of the problematical and it is easy to be struck by the modernity of its creator Montaigne is engaged in an Abbau of his tradition (the term has lately been translated as “deconstruction”). It is an active deconstruction in the genuine sense: a clearing away of rubbish, of reified sedimentations, so that issues may once again be laid bare in their concreteness. (21)

Holdheim’s claims for the essay are undoubtedly the most nobly ambitious ones made by any essay critic. However, further exploration of the essay’s position in the academy in the subsequent period puts these claims in an ironical light. This happens because of the ambiguity in the use of the term “deconstruction” in the context of the essay. Holdheim

used the term in a modal sense in relation to essay as genre i.e. in the sense of a broad but invariable orientation towards deconstructing received opinion that defines the form. His expectations for the recovery of the essay are based on the belief that deconstruction as a mode or approach guides both the essay and modern literary theory and hence the essay will find a respectable place within that theoretical framework. What he apparently did not realize was that more than deconstruction as a mode or orientation it was deconstruction as a specific theory of textual analysis, followed and practiced with extreme intellectual rigor by a well marked circle of critics, that dominated the academy in the subsequent years. It can not be negated that even deconstruction as theory had points of similarity with the essay as a form in so far as both of them shared, what G. Douglas Atkins calls, “temperamental affinity” (*Estranging*, 11). But as a textual practice or theory deconstruction had very specific methodological demands which the essay did not meet. As a consequence, most ironically, the deconstructive form of the essay did not fit into the deconstructive theoretical scheme and the form’s academic marginalization continued almost unchanged.

In his seminal study on the nature and function of the essay as form, *The Observing Self: Rediscovering the Essay*, Graham Good provides one of the most well analyzed accounts of this strange failure of the academy and more specifically of the theory of deconstruction to accommodate the essay despite the rare presence of a similar philosophical base. Good categorizes it as a peculiar epistemological twist whereby deconstruction fell prey to that very ethos of universalistic dogma which it aimed to dismantle and as a consequence started “operating at the level of general laws (or anti-laws)” (180). This twist led to a rift in the cord of similarity between deconstruction and the essay at three levels. The first of this appears on the epistemological stance of skepticism that is generally thought to be common to both the essay and deconstruction. The essay’s skepticism stems from its characteristic faith on the value of individual experience and of the concrete, particular and variable nature of phenomena because of which the form is capable of remaining open to the possibility of various levels of simultaneous and even contradictory particulars even though it necessarily dismantles generalized and abstract totalitarianism. Deconstruction, however, would negate the very

possibility of grasping any particular instance even as partially authentic and would term all representation as already deconstructed. It means that whereas the essay “claims to articulate *this* self and *that* object, but not as instances of general laws” and continues to remain “skeptical in its traditional attitude...skeptical precisely about general laws, even general laws of skepticism”, deconstruction goes to the extreme of turning its skeptical core into a “universal, even dogmatic skepticism” (180-181).

Similarly, on the aspect of “indeterminacy” which Good considers to be originally “common to the essay and deconstruction, Montaigne and Derrida”, there appears a fissure in the subsequent lines of development. Montaigne’s concept of indeterminacy was limited to the self and the object in so far as he accepted the possibility and reality of multiple versions of experience regarding the same object. Deconstruction, on the other hand, again touches the extremes and turns itself into a “form of credulity, a naïve *unrealism* believing that we can perceive nothing but our own constructs which we can endlessly deconstruct and reconstruct”. In the ultimate analysis, for Good, “universal skepticism and universal credulity” practiced by deconstruction as a theory remain “equally disabling” (181) and he is convinced that even Montaigne and Bacon “would undoubtedly have rejected Derrida’s textualism as scholastic, as privileging the order of words over the words of things. It was exactly against that mentality that the essay originally reacted” (182). In other words, whereas in the essay deconstruction was rooted and had remained a mode of enquiry and a posture of subversion (in the sense connoted by Holdheim’s reference), in deconstruction as theory the same mode solidified into a near dogmatic epistemology. R. Lane Kauffmann pointed out in another context that though the deconstructionist theorists started with the aim of “a methodological recognition of contingency” (234) their attempt fell short of it in being “driven by philosophical systems in their very attempt to deconstruct these systems” (235).

How far Good’s and Kauffman’s account of deconstruction’s loss of the subversive core to academic systematization is proper can be a point of debate. But from the perspective of the essay’s problem of academic theorization it remains a fact that it does not prove a fruitful route to recognition. Overall, then, the essay’s place in the academy has not been

improved by any of the critical or theoretical traditions since the seventeenth century. Though it looks like a hopeless situation when seen through a historical perspective, an alternative approach might be proposed in exploring the essay as a form on its own grounds rather than by previous or existing theoretical standards. It means the analysis of the potentialities unique to the form in terms of the theoretical functions they perform in different discursive structures rather than judging those potentialities by standards of theoretical specifics. Though not very systematically organized or overtly apparent three such modes of theorizations on the essay as form can be located to which this study will now turn.

2.2. Theorizing the Essay as Form

2.2.1. German Essay Theory: Poetics of the Essay as Critique

Analyzing the essay as form against the background of what can be called the school of “Philosophical Essayism” (Kauffman 227) of Central Europe, or more specifically of Germany, can be refreshing and enlightening in so far as it is a truly and thoroughly theoretical tradition of essay study and stands as a potential alternative to the essay-theory impasse experienced in the Anglo-American academy. Conceptualization of the essay as form within this tradition is rooted in the German Idealist thought and more specifically in the branch of systematic aesthetics (Good 15) and as such is a part of an old and established lineage of intellectual speculation.³ There are three aspects unique to this mode of essay theorization. Firstly, within this theoretical mode the essay is conceived not as a purely or easily accessible form of creative writing but rather as a form of intellectual probing essentially critical in nature. Secondly, and as a consequence of the first, the essay is more closely related to concepts of knowledge and ideology rather than imagination. As Philip Lopate puts it, within the European tradition “a fragmented, aphoristic, critical type of essay-writing...became used as a subversive tool of skeptical probing, a critique of ideology in a time when large, synthesizing theories and systems of philosophy are no longer trusted” (Lopate, “What Happened” 84). In

other words, the ideologically subversive core of the form that could not be accommodated within the mainstream critical tradition in the Anglo-American academy found its philosophical justification in the German lineage. Thirdly, and most importantly, the realization of this potential of the form logically leads up to the revelation of its value as a mode of discourse and a repositioning of the form at the centre instead of the margin. As G. Douglas Atkins points out “In Europe the essay receives a quite different treatment in line with the intellectual, cultural, and critical responsibilities associated with it. In Europe in fact the essay is a very ambitious form, not at all a second class citizen, but a genre making a literary and cultural difference” (*Estranging* 54).

The first document in this tradition that took up the question of defining the essay’s nature and significance as a form was Georg Lukács’ essay on the essay titled “On the Nature and Form of the Essay”, which originally was the preface to his essay collection named *Soul and Form* published in 1911 and was addressed as a letter to his friend Leo Popper. Taking the immediate context of the essays in the collection as a springboard, Lukács tries to ascertain whether there is “something in them that makes them a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle . . . is the same in each one?” (1). The remarkable thing about Lukács’ account is that instead of trying to define the essay in a straightforward manner he contextualizes it and moves by raising a series of basic but conceptual questions and contraries to focalize the identity of the form. (It is very important to note here that for Lukács and the other German theorists to be mentioned after him, it is the critical essay that is the immediate concern. It is so because of the aesthesist background of their tradition. However, their concern is focused on the individuality of the essay as a form, criticism and art working mainly as the background). Lukács starts with the realization that intellectual discussion about art, literature and criticism “have barely touched upon the essence of the real question: what is an essay?” (1) and have also failed to explain the basic question of “why after all do we read essays?” (2). As a way of answering, Lukács puts forward a unique and novel identity for the essay. He identifies the essay with criticism or what he calls “critique” that has the status of a unique art form and declares that “. . .the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigor of law, from all other art forms” (2) and categorically distances it from “the

icy, final perfection of philosophy” on the one hand and “the complete or approximate attainment of scientific goals” on the other (3).

Going beyond science and philosophy, Lukács designates the essay as “an entirely different kind of expression of the human temperament” and places the essay in an ancient lineage of writings of what he calls “the greatest essayists . . . Plato’s *Dialogues*, the texts of the mystics, Montaigne’s *Essays*, Kierkegaard’s imaginary diaries and short stories.” What distinguishes these writings, according to Lukács, is that in them “life problems are raised” (3). The concept of “Life” runs through Lukács’ text as the embodiment of the abstract, ideal, dynamic and holistic level of human experience to which only the form of the essay can give expression. In highly idealist and abstract terms Lukács tries to convey his idea that “there are experiences in life which can not be expressed by any gesture and which yet long for expression I mean intellectuality, conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality...as the motive force of life”. (7) By conceptualizing the essay as the suitable form of expression for these concerns Lukács indirectly highlights the inherently critical, dynamic, introspective and open ended character of the form. He stresses these qualities as essentially distinguishing the essay from science and philosophy because in the essay a question is “posed as question only: for the answer, here, does not supply a “solution” like one of the answers of science, or, at purer heights those of philosophy” (7) and also from tragedy (though in tragedy also questions about life are raised) because tragedy is “crowned only by the end, only the end gives meaning, sense and form to the whole” whereas in the essay “A question is thrown up and extended so far in depth that it becomes the question of all questions, but after that everything remains open” (14).

More than anything, however, Lukács seems to highlight, though obliquely, the value and significance of the essay form as related to life. He knows that by relating the essay with criticism he puts the essay in a position secondary to creative art and he saves the form by pointing out that it is only the modern essay that takes up criticism of artifacts as the medium for reaching out to transcendent realities. In the ancient and purer manifestations of “essayism” as in Plato “the questions are addressed directly to life itself” (3). But even

in the modern critical essay, Lukács reiterates, the essayistic individuality remains intact though hidden in what he calls “irony”. By it he means “that humour and that irony which we find in the writings of the truly great essayists” and it consists in “the critic always speaking about the ultimate problems of life, but in a tone which implies that he is only discussing picture and books . . .” (9). For Lukács, then, even in the modern manifestation of essayistic introspection in the form of the critical essay the form’s essential and ancient spirit of individual, free and open appropriation of the most profound questions through the most ordinary looking human realities remain intact. And as a result the form acquires a unique identity different from all other forms of human thought and expression. Undoubtedly there is a sense of ambivalence in Lukács’ attitude in so far as on the one hand he is proud of the fact that “The essay can calmly and proudly set its fragmentariness against the petty completeness of scientific exactitude” (17) and on the other hand he is attracted to the ideal of a transcendent life. This longing for an idealistic completeness can be understood as triggered by the fragmented condition of central Europe on the eve of World War I (Kauffmann 228). But in the long run it was the essay’s anti-systematic and provisional nature that marked it, for Lukács, as “something completely new” (3). As Arpad Kadarkay points out, through this preference “Lukács the essayist disputed Hegel’s claim that only art, religion, and philosophy reveal the absolute. By contrast, Lukács elevates the essay to an art form, designed to capture the absolute or permanent in the transitory, fugitive, and contingent Dissenting from Hegel, Lukács believes that the essay, as an art form, mediates between art and philosophy” (1053-54). In other words, for Lukács the essay is both a form of expression as well as a form of knowledge.

Walter Benjamin’s “Epistemo-Critical Prologue” to *The Origins of German Tragic Drama* (Written in 1928 but published after his death in 1977) contained a sketchy and oblique concept of what he called “the esoteric essay” which none the less constitutes an important link in the conceptual development of the German theory of the essay as form. Like Lukács before him Benjamin was concerned with the issue of the essay’s peculiar form seen against the methodological procedures of traditional philosophy and modern institutionalized science and the latent potentiality of the form to stand as an alternative to

both. Benjamin sets a basic binary of “truth” as representation and “knowledge” as acquisition, relating the first to philosophy and the second to science. He offers a critique of traditional philosophy on the ground that it has already acquired the “finished form” (27) of a system and as a consequence has come away from its original purpose of “representation of truth”, developing instead a leaning towards “acquisition of knowledge” in the manner of science. This confusion, according to Benjamin, has put philosophy in danger of losing the “law of its form” though outwardly it has acquired a garb of universality. This status of philosophy, according to Benjamin has its own hazards:

Inasmuch as it is determined by this concept of system, philosophy is in danger of accommodating itself to a syncretism which weaves a spider’s web between separate kinds of knowledge in an attempt to ensnare the truth as if it were something which came flying in from outside. (28)

To remain true to its original purpose, philosophy, in Benjamin’s opinion, has to find its proper form which he calls “treatise” or the “esoteric essay”. Against the acquisitive method of system, the essay is marked by “the absence of an uninterrupted purposeful structure” which is the form’s “primary characteristic”. The essay, Benjamin concedes, has an “irregular rhythm” but he still considers it to be “the mode most proper to the process of contemplation” because according to him it can tirelessly make “new beginnings, returning in a roundabout way to its original object” and as a result it has the freedom of “pursuing different levels of meaning in its examination of one single object” (28).

As Lukács had seen the essay in the context of criticism, Benjamin considers in it the context of philosophy. But in both the cases the qualitative understanding of the form remains rooted in the same values. Both the accounts bestow the form with the capability of maintaining a truly critical and introspective insight on the face of closed and totalitarian claims of systems. Benjamin defines the essential character of this form through a series of binaries where the values of the essay are contrasted with and highlighted against the qualities of system: “the art of the interruption in contrast to the

chain of deduction; the tenacity of the essay in contrast to the single gesture of the fragment; the repetition of themes in contrast to shallow universalism; the fullness of concentrated positivity in contrast to the negation of polemic” (32).

The elements of experiment and critique related to the essay were also the points of focus in Max Bense’s “On the Essay and its Prose” (originally published in German as “Über den Essay und seine Prosa”) published in 1947. Unlike Lukács and Benjamin who saw the essay primarily as a form, Bense saw it as a way or method of thinking and writing and the defining trait of this method was what he called “experiment”: “We are convinced that the essay is an experimental method; it is about writing experimentally” (71). Bense’s preoccupation with the concept of “experiment” came from his unique intellectual involvement with physics and philosophy which he turned into his area of expertise as “philosophy of technology” and gave rise to a controversial but innovative “technological, material aesthetics” (Müller 177). At first glance it might appear that Bense’s scientific orientation towards the essay stands contrary to Lukács’ and Benjamin’s theorization of the essay as different from science. However, Bense develops an analogy where he compares the essay’s experimental method to that of experimental physics where “one poses a question to nature, expects an answer, examines it and quantifies it” and clearly distinguishes it from theoretical physics which only “describes nature . . . axiomatically and deductively”. Ultimately the difference between the two branches is seen as paradigmatic of the “difference between an essay and treatise” (71).

In a curious way then Bense’s understanding of the essay on scientific terms of experiment leads him to the same convictions regarding the form’s essential difference from absolutist, conclusion oriented work which Lukács and Benjamin had reached by negating science. By “essay writing” Bense referred to a method of composition which involves “pushing the object of study here and there, interrogating, prodding, examining, thoroughly reflecting on it, tackling the subject matter from different sides . . .” This leads to a type of conditions where the subject under study comes into the context of what Bense calls “a literary configuration”. By “configuration” Bense means the essayistic procedure of putting the subject matter in contact with as many different perspectives as

possible to bring out all its dimensions into play. This is the central component of the experimental method of essay writing according to Bense and can be found in every true essay in the form of a “capacity for perspectives....a philosophical perspectivalism” (72).

For Bense, then, unlike Lukács and Benjamin, the unique “character” of the essay “does not simply reside in the literary form” in which it is manifested but in the configural, experimental method of its composition. However, Bense’s concept of “configuration” bears a clear mark of resemblance to Benjamin’s idea of essay’s “irregular rhythm” (28) which allows the form to study a subject at all the levels of its meanings. Similarly for both Lukács’ idea of the essay as form and Bense’s idea of the essay as experimental method, it is the idea of critique which is the root. Whereas Lukács had explored the reasons behind the essay’s close relationship with the criticism in the modern period, Bense locates the essay’s essential experimental orientation in the inherently critical character of the human intellect. He finds it “striking that all great essayists are critics” (73) and in a way of illustration puts forward an impressive account of the traditions of intellectual-critical essay writing in France, Germany, England and Austria. These give him the confidence to declare: “This much is clear: the essay originates from the critical essence of our intellect, whose desire for experimentation is simply a necessity of its manner of being, its method” (74).

The notion of the “critique” was also the definitive criteria of the essay for Theodor W. Adorno, the most articulate theorist on the form in the German tradition, who categorically termed the essay “the critical form *par excellence*” in his famous “The Essay as Form” (1958)⁴. But moving one step further than the other theorists Adorno called the essay “the critique of ideology” (166) thereby locating the form and its function in a deeper and more complex context. Adorno’s piece is the most elaborately theoretical of all the tracts on the essay mentioned till now and can be seen as a summation as well as total development of all the concerns raised by Lukács, Benjamin and Bense. The conjunction of critique and ideology that Adorno explored in his tract as marking the essay proved to be one of the strongest and most analytical defenses that the essay ever received and has remained almost indispensable for later theorization on the

form. It is because relating the essay to the concept of ideology at once lifts the form out of the narrow bounds of literature or criticism and places it in the wider context of textuality as discursive and cultural practice.

Adorno starts with the concern of why the essay had never got recognition in the intellectual circle in Germany. He finds the reason in a strange cultural moment where strict division of knowledge into categories has stopped the reception of anything that does not fit into existing structures. It is a culture that acts by “fencing up art as a preserve for the irrational, identifying knowledge with organized science and excluding anything that does not fit this antithesis” (151). The essay poses a direct challenge to this kind of restrictive pattern and “does not permit its domain to be prescribed”; consequently “the essay is decried as a hybrid” and is “classed among the oddities” (152). However, Adorno is conscious of the fact that the essay’s challenge to the structures of established academic knowledge structures is far deeper rooted than this. The essay “provokes resistance”, Adorno reveals, because it holds up the idea of a discursive and “intellectual freedom” that refuses to be accommodated within the totalitarian, purist and pseudo-scientific ideals of academic thought. These academic ideals, according to Adorno are nothing but what he calls “marks of a repressive order” and are shared without any distinction by “the bustle of authentic philosophy aiming at eternal values, a sealed and flawlessly organized science, and by a concept less intuitive art.” Against this all encompassing conceptual framework the essay revolts by its entire nature, by “refraining from any reduction to a principle” (156).

Adorno’s thesis regarding the essay is also significant because unlike the other theorists in the tradition he defends the form not simply by explaining its nature but by revealing the philosophical significance of those very traits that are generally considered the form’s flaws or weakness. It functions like a “revisionist effort” (Atkins, *Estranging* 59) that tries to save the essay from the long established misconceptions regarding its character and value. The essay, Adorno is conscious, is generally criticized for not following any neat and conclusive pattern of arrangement, for its “neglect of logical synthesis”. Adorno explains this as not the absence of logical criteria but the presence of an alternative one.

Going against the restrictive and hierarchical procedures of discursive logic, the essay, in Adorno's terms, "disavows rigid deduction in the interest of establishing cross-connections" and by doing so "develops thoughts differently from discursive logic" (169). Adorno compares this alternative logic to that of music in so far as it "co-ordinates elements, rather than subordinating them" (170). However it is the philosophical significance of this apparently extrinsic quality that is of primary interest to Adorno. By negating the didactic procedures of logic, the essay actually subverts the concept of "method" that forms the core of Cartesian philosophy and as such the basis of the enlightenment in the West. "Method", for Adorno, implies the preoccupation with creating a semblance of simplicity that covers the inherent complexity of all phenomena and manifests itself in the drive towards providing "definitions" of every conceivable object. In reality it is an ideological tool for maintaining the delusion of a simple, categorizable and definable reality. The essay—"the critical form per excellence" as Adorno calls it—reacts against this ideological reductionism by demanding that "a matter be considered, from the very first, in its whole complexity" and by doing it shake off "the illusion of a simple, basically logical world that so perfectly suits the defense of the status quo" (163). In other words, for Adorno, the formal lack of organization that marks the essay is in reality a instrument of resistance to ideological suppression of thought. In a similar manner, reacting against the concept of the essay's limitation as a form because of its preoccupation with the ordinary and the particular, Adorno establishes that by this very trait the essay subverts philosophy's age old preoccupation with the general and the abstract that is nothing but an "ancient injustice toward the transitory" (158).

In varying degrees and through different terminologies the critics in the German tradition of essay criticism finally seem to arrive on the same conclusion regarding the essay's nature and value. Their theorization, though highly idealistic, abstract and esoteric in nature, is of special significance because they attempt to offer an explanative poetics for the form instead of simple description of its qualities. Peter Uwe Hohendahl provides the national and cultural situation in Germany that brought this debate on the possibilities of the essay to the fore. According to Hohendahl, due to the rigorous reshaping of all academic disciplines on the scientific model in the German universities in late nineteenth

and early twentieth centuries, a debate ensued regarding the need and possibility of having expression of knowledge outside the academic structures. The necessity was felt due to suspicions regarding “the academic tradition and its alliance with the social and political establishment.” And the essay was forwarded as the form suitable for the learned but uninstitutional intellectual’s mode of expression. More than that, however, it was highlighted due to the belief that “the essayist's performance calls into question the apparatus of the academy, its unspoken alliance with the existing political order under the guise of freedom of research and scientific objectivity”. (224). To have this culturally specific framework in perspective is important because it points at the issue of relevance according to which essay’s manifestation and its theorization might take different forms at different contexts as the later accounts of other essay criticism traditions will justify.

2.2.2 Anglo American Essay Theory: Poetics of the Essay as Freedom

To call the existing tradition of critical insight on the essay in the Anglo-American academy a “theory” poses a problem because this tradition appears to be marked by a diversion away from theory as an institutionalized set of concepts and practices. In fact, this remains the strongest difference separating this tradition from the German theorization of the form so that the attempt at offering a theory of the essay looks like an “anathema” to the Anglo-American essay critics who try “only to describe the form’s essential features and to account for its special effects and pleasures” (Atkins, *Estranging* 54). Against the esoteric and highly specialized German theorization of the essay as a form of cognition and critique, Anglo-American essay criticism appears to be a markedly easy going and seemingly traditional descriptive body of analysis which valorizes the essay as a unique form of creative writing distinguished by an element of individual and imaginative “freedom”.

The reason is not difficult to find. As has been mentioned at the beginning of the present chapter, the attempts at situating the essay in the mainstream of criticism in the Anglo American academy did not prove fruitful and the form always remained at the periphery

of institutionalized literary studies. Contrary to that, however, it was developed consistently on the creative side by a lineage of illustrious essayists running unbroken till the present. This tradition and presence of the essay was recognized and kept visible by two types of textual practice, namely books on literary history and essay anthologies. In Britain, for example, some of the best historical and critical analyses of the form's development in relation to the socio-cultural determinants of the respective ages as well as that of individual essayists can be found in *The Cambridge History of English Literature*, *The Oxford History of English Literature* and *The Penguin History of Literature* series. Contributions like those of Douglas Bush on the interrelation of the forms of the essay and the "Character" in the seventeenth century (volume VII of *The Oxford History of English Literature*) or of Bonamy Dobree on the rise and development of the eighteenth century periodical essays (in volume IX of the same series) are some of the best researched accounts though not what can be called theoretical.

Similarly, in the United States a very impressive and consistent array of essay anthologies exists which has kept a sense of a national tradition of essay writing alive. Notable examples will include *The Art of the Essay* (1990) edited by Lydia Fakundiny, *The Art of the Personal Essay: An Anthology from the Classical Era to the Present* (1994) edited by Philip Lopate, Bill Roorbach's *Contemporary Creative Nonfiction: the Art of Truth* (2001) and John D'Agata's *The Next American Essay* (2003). However, the most extraordinary effort at essay anthologization has been *The Best American Essays* series that has been published yearly in volume form since 1986 till present under Robert Atwan's direction as series editor, but with a different guest editor each year. (The series has been published by Ticknor & Fields up to 1993 and by Houghton Mifflin from 1994 to date). The most impressive feature of the anthologies in this series has been the introductory commentary they offer on the form which are generally written by well known contemporary essayists, journalists and literary critics. (The editorial introductions to the various volumes of *The Best American Essays* for example have been written by figures like Elizabeth Hardwick, Annie Dillard, Justin Kaplan, Joyce Carol Oats, Jamaica Kincaid, Joseph Epstein, Cynthia Ozick etc).

The result is that in Anglo-America is found what can be called “a significant body of commentary” on the essay as a form rather than an explanative “theory”; but it is a “self-reflective” commentary written by essayists themselves in “prefaces, introductions, letters, journals and essays on the essay” and though not thoroughly theoretical, does exist with the “certainty of a collective poetics” (Klaus, “Toward” XV). In other words, though academic or theoretical insight is difficult to find on the form, essayists’ reflections on the essay stand, as Carl H. Klaus comments, “as an alternative source of commentary on the form” and serves an important purpose:

All in all these self-reflective statements and pieces engage in a wide range of issues and problems concerning the purpose of the essay, the subject matter of the essay, the form of the essay, the length of the essay, the variety of the essay, the essay and other forms of writing, the style of the essayist, the voice of the essayist, the personality of the essayist, the mind of the essayist, the knowledge of the essayist, the composing process of the essayist, the essayist and the reader, the essayist and culture, the essayist and the journalist, the essayist and the critic, the essayist and the scholar, the essayist and truth. (“Essayist” 155-156).

The fact that in this tradition reflections on the essay come mostly from the practicing artists of the form—the essayists themselves—instead of cultural and literary theoreticians like in Germany, marks a visible difference between the primary concerns of the two schools. At first sight it might appear that the preference of the Anglo-American essay critics is on the side of analyzing and assessing the form in terms of the actual creative process involved and stressing the role of the imaginative individual—the essayist—in the process of essay writing. That is not false as the next section will elaborate; but it is important to note that this preference works only as the stepping stone to a much deeper and wider understanding regarding the form’s function and value that is unique to the tradition of Anglo-American essay criticism.

The essay, within Anglo American essay criticism, is seen as embodying a unique space of free individual creativity marked by the presence of the essayist's personality or subjectivity and an open, flexible shape distinguishing it from any kind of formal, prescriptive or logically bound discourse. To bring "personality into literature", Virginia Woolf commented in the 1920s, is "the essayist's most proper but most dangerous tool" ("Modern Essay" 46) and the same view was reiterated by in 1980s by Scott Russell Sander's famous essay on the essay titled "The Singular First Person" when he commented : "In this era of pre-packaged thought, the essay is the closest thing we have, on paper, to a record of the individual mind at work and play . . . the essay is a haven for the private, idiosyncratic voice in an era of anonymous babble" (660). In between these two accounts lies a history of half a century in which most of the important critical analyses on the form written in Anglo-America espoused that view in some form or other⁵ Taken together, both these elements elevate the essay from a literary form to a principle of individual freedom that stands as a contrast to the axiomatic rigidity of systematic forms of exposition. In Anglo-American essay criticism it creates an image of the essay as "a wide-open space, an embodiment and enactment of untrammelled discursive freedom" (Heilker, "Twenty years"183).

Personal and discursive freedom embodied by the essay, however, is considered at two distinct but interrelated levels. The first is the primary level of formal or stylistic orientation where the element of free subjective expression is identified with the presence of the first person 'I' as a major distinguishing mark of the form as a whole. As Virginia Woolf asserted:

Almost all essays begin with a capital I—"I think," "I feel"—and when you have said that, it is clear that you are not writing history or philosophy or anything but an essay, which may be brilliant or profound, which may deal with the immortality of the soul or the rheumatism in your left shoulder, but is primarily an expression of personal opinion ("Decay" 25).

Similarly, discursive freedom is conceptualized as the flexible open ended shape of the essay that allows it to break free of any restriction on subject matter selection and development of theme. Most importantly, this stylistically defined aspect of freedom is accentuated by a contrast with those forms of expression where conformity to predetermined and traditional frames is prescribed over individual creativity. As a result a near constant preoccupation of the Anglo-American tradition of essay criticism seems to rest on a binary opposition where the essay's identity as a free, individual and creative form is set against that of the professional article as the embodiment of systematic, objective and specialized discourse. As early as 1902, William Dean Howells set a difference between the two and lamented the fact the "essay began to confuse itself with the article, and to assume an obligation to premises and conclusions" (qtd. in Klaus and Stuckey-French xix) and towards the end of the century Edward Hoagland was still holding that position, claiming that an essay's order is "the mind's natural flow, instead of a systematized outline of ideas...more wayward and informal than an article or a treatise" (25). The strongest and most elaborate account of the distinction, however, came from William H. Gass in his essay on the essay titled "Emerson and the Essay":

The essay is obviously the opposite of that awful object, "the article", which, like items picked up in shops during one's lunch hour, represents itself as the latest cleverness, a novel consequence of thought, skill, labor, and free enterprise; but never as an activity—the process, the working, the wondering. As an article, it should be striking of course, original of course, important naturally, yet without possessing either grace or charm or elegance, since these qualities will interfere with the impression of seriousness which it wishes to maintain...it must appear complete and straightforward and footnoted and useful and certain...the article pretends that everything is clear, that its argument is unassailable, that there is no saggy patches, no illicit interferences, no illegitimate connections...its

manners are starched and stuffy...it knows, with respect to every subject and point of view it is ever likely to entertain, what words to use, what form to follow, what authorities to respect; it is the careful product of the professional...writing to be born for its immediate burial in a Journal. (25).

At first glance it might appear that the binary opposition between the essay and the article so steadfastly maintained by the essay critics is primarily a matter of formal or expository contrast and preference where the essay's creative flexibility and freedom is favored against the intellectual and specialized authority of the article. But when analyzed a little more deeply it can be seen leading to another level of significance lying in the concept of freedom in relation to the form of the essay.

What is at stake, actually, is not freedom as a simple formal attribute present in a particular form of writing or absent in another, rather it is the aspect of a value system or more specifically an epistemological approach that such presence or absence implies. In other words, the dichotomy of the essay vs. the article is so crucial for essay critics because it signifies the dichotomy between two contrasting approaches to knowledge and reality and by extension to value systems and to life. Whereas the sense of conclusiveness and certainty that the article represents is seen as implying "a naively positivistic approach to knowledge, an approach out of touch with the problematic nature of things" (Klaus and Stuckey-French xx), its tone and expression of objectivity, specialization and exclusivity are seen as "... certainly impersonal, even mechanical and clinical, thus bearing no emotion apparently having little human feeling" (Atkins, *Familiar Essay* 145). Against this epistemological and humanitarian deficiency the essay is seen as "fundamentally democratic" (Anderson, "Hearsay" 304) or "conversational and collegial" (Atkins, *Estranging* 6) in so far as it gives space to creative and intellectual speculation outside the strictures of systematic discourse and also remains accessible to a general rather than a specialized readership. Most importantly, it is seen as representing a mode of knowledge and living marked by democratic and egalitarian values of experiment,

openness, accessibility and freedom. It is believed, as Philip Lopate remarked in his introduction to *The Art of the Personal Essay*, that at its roots the essay “is a mode of being. It points a way for the self to function with relative freedom in an uncertain world” (xliv). The dichotomy between the essay and the article, then, is “reframed in terms of a dichotomy between organic and mechanistic form, and by extension between humanistic and technological values” (Klaus and Stuckey-French xix).

In Anglo-American essay criticism, then, the essay is valorized not simply as a writing form with a unique formal attribute of freedom, but is also identified with a democratic and egalitarian stance of epistemological proportions. In the latter capacity, it is seen as a potential alternative to the dominance of the academic article which is identified with a closed and hierarchical world-view. Such a scheme carries an echo of the original formal logic of the essay as conceived by Montaigne, as has been discussed in the introductory chapter, in which the essay’s identity was derived from its essential and intended separation from the established forms of academic discourses dominant during the renaissance. In both these contexts the personal orientation of the essay—the essayistic “I” Virginia Woolf talked about—is seen representing, at the deepest level, a free and subjective model of cognition which stands as an antithesis to any dogmatic or prescriptive view of reality or life. However, Anglo-American criticism marks its individual position on this issue by developing the concern with the personal to another level and also by following a slightly different line of argument. Within American study of the essay, especially, this is related to a historical and evaluative positioning of the personal against the familiar, both as subforms of the essay and as core essayistic principles.

In the history of the essay’s development, a shift is recognized around the end of the Romantic period in which the personal subform of the essay was gradually overshadowed by the familiar subform. In more precise terms, this can be seen as the shift away from the highly reflective and predominantly subjective personal essays of Willaim Hazlitt, Thomas De Quincy or Charles Lamb and towards a line of essayist from Addison and Steele to Virginia Woolf and E. B. White, honing the art of the familiar essay in different

ways. As we saw in the introductory chapter, the personal and the familiar are both subsumed within the essay though the predominance of one element over the other may manifest in the personal or the familiar subform. In the Romantic period, the strengthening of the principle of individualism and creative reflection found a natural corollary in the personal essay, which appeared almost like the prose twin of romantic poetry in essays like “On Going a Journey” by Hazlitt or the “Elia” essays by Charles Lamb. In these essays the center stage is held by the various shades of the essayists’ self-reflective subjectivities as they record the nuances of their memories, feelings, inhibitions and fantasies. G. Douglas Atkins points out the degree to which the Romantic view of the reflective self and the form of the personal essay found natural allies in each other by referring to none other than Wordsworth. For Atkins, it is predictable that in Preface to *Lyrical Ballads*, “he called, no wonder, his and Coleridge’s poems ‘short essays’” (*Tracing the Essay* 67). Atkins elaborates:

In Wordsworth, whose Preface to *Lyrical Ballads* often reads like an apology for the essay and whose revolutionary poems are lyrical essays in verse, the self may be called the principal ‘focalizing device’ and more; indeed, the self is the object of study as it perceives and responds to ten thousand daffodils.(58)

After the Romantic period the essay continued to develop in a world turned more and more complex by industrialization, rapid expansion of cities and the rise of the middle class. The ethos of deep and abstract self-reflection accompanied by introvert and solitary musing, found in the Romantic personal essays, gradually took a turning towards a busy and shared way of life fit to be represented in the familiar essay in which “‘the world’ asserts itself, challenging in individual instances the primacy of self.” (58) (Detailed study of the development of the familiar essay in the eighteenth century is incorporated in Chapter 3). It does not mean that the personal element, the distinguishing mark of the essay ever since its inception, is lost in the process; rather the personal is used, henceforth, as a channel to focalize on the familiar nuances of life and culture. However,

there is a uniquely significant way in which the principle of the familiar is seen as functioning in the familiar essay in its 'worldly' avatar. The principle of the familiar, in the familiar essay, is not only restricted to the thematic choice of familiar subject matter but is also expanded to a familiarizing effect that is achieved by movement from particular and familiar objects to general and familiar truths and realizations. The familiar essay, in other words moves from "experience" to "meaning" (Atkins, *Tracing the Essay* 68). It is this deeper connotation of meaning hidden in the otherwise mundane looking form of the familiar essay that has kept it, in the opinion of essay critics like Atkins, alive and relevant so that "a genuinely unique, concrete and particular angle of vision is manifest in all successful instances of the form....there remains the experience, potentially sharable by all of us, the general that exists alongside the particular" (51). Such "successful instances" are located in the works of a long line of essayists like Virginia Woolf, D. H. Lawrence, T.S. Eliot, E. B. White, and Hilaire Belloc. (Atkins, *Familiar Essay* 12-13)

In the final analysis, the essay in its familiar mode, as practiced, conceptualized and studied within Anglo-American essay criticism, is seen as a nuanced blend of the values of both individual creativity and democratic intellectualism, elevated to, as Philip Lopate put in his aforementioned comment, a "mode of being". This conjunction of the values of individual freedom, creativity and democracy placed in the philosophy of the essay's form and elevated to the ideal of a "mode of being" or way of life rests at the centre of the Anglo-American view of the essay. Marking a difference of orientation with the German tradition of essay criticism where the form is evaluated in terms of its critical and ideological functions, the Anglo-American tradition invests the essay with humanitarian and ethical implications. Drawing on such consciousness, essay critics in the United States, in the recent years, have come to analyze the form's potential in two related but distinct areas of concern, namely literary criticism and writing instruction.

In the field of literary criticism, the essay vs. article debate has led to the considerations about introducing a kind of "essayistic criticism" that has the democratic qualities of the essay form and can pose as an alternative to the dominance of the article. When seen

through a historical perspective, the rise of the article as a medium of literary analysis appears to be a natural corollary of the institutionalization of literary studies that took place in the second half of the nineteenth century. In this new mode literary studies became a highly specialized branch of academic study located in university departments, practiced by professional academic experts and expressed itself in terms of rigorous investigation and research. The establishment of professional bodies like the Modern Language Association in 1883, of university presses and the birth of academic journals streamlined literary studies into an exclusive area of professional expertise. And the article in its objective, scholarly and formal avatar became the favored medium of expression of this new mode of literary studies (Atkins, *Estranging* 45-46). At the same time it relegated the form of the essay to the peripheries of the new academic system as its inferior “Other”. On the surface level the difference between the essay and the article seems to be a simple one of kind so that Geoffrey Hartman commented about how “the words "essay" and "article" give different impressions, yet the forms to which they refer have never been defined in a precise way” (“Literary Commentary” 257). But for the essay critics the difference between the two forms is much more about visibility and academic status than appearance or impression.

This academic and scholarly turn in the nature and appearance of literary studies has been so overwhelming that criticism that is not academic or not institutionalized has become a virtual impossibility. History of criticism, however, shows earlier phases where the character, practice and function of criticism had different implications.

The rhetorical trope by which the word “criticism” is narrowed to mean what is written and taught by professors involves “forgetting” of what was once thought important – that criticism was formerly part of a “literary culture” much broader than the university and, indeed, scarcely involving the university; the literary critics were once journalists and men of letters, usually outsiders to the university; that they wrote either for general readers or for the community of imaginative writers, rather than for a

coterie of specialized professors and graduate students, and thus delivered their findings and opinions in an accessible style rather than in an esoteric jargon of methodological terms". (Graff and Gibbons 8)

The medium in which this older version of criticism available for "general readers" and written in an "accessible style" was communicated was the essay and as a part of the present consciousness regarding the need to focalize the essay in the academy, essay critics propose the reintroduction of the form as an alternative mode of critical analysis. For Graham Good, for example, the tenets of such a criticism will be characterized by "a move forward to an essayistic relationship between literature and ideas. That is, instead of the ideas being applied to the text, they would be evoked by in a non-systematic manner" and he is hopeful that "a revival of the essay tradition could rejuvenate academic literary criticism" (Good, *Observing Self* 184). Similarly, G. Douglas Atkins sees such a criticism as coming through "reestablishing contact with the Anglo-American tradition of the personal or familiar essay" and as distinguished by its practice that would "place the experience of reading in the forefront, relating it to the writer's experience" (*Estranging* 16). At the root, however, all such attempts at finding a place for the essay in the academic set-up is backed by the belief that, as Chris Anderson puts it, "the same amateurism and democratic character that make the essay inappropriate for contemporary scholarship make it more and more appealing to readers weary of the hierarchies and fraternities of scholarship, however necessary they may be" ("Hearsay" 305).

From another perspective, however, this whole enterprise can be seen as belonging to a broad consciousness regarding the need of making the practice of criticism relevant and accessible for a wider general readership by breaking its aura of specialized academic exclusivity. The inherently familiar yet introspective form of the essay seems to be most suitable vehicle for such an attempt. As Edward Said himself conceded in his seminal book *The World The Text and The Critic*: "criticism is an academic thing, located for the most part away from the questions that trouble the reader of a daily newspaper. Up to a certain point this is as it should be. But we have reached the stage at which specialization

and professionalization . . . have transported the professional and academic critic of literature . . . into another world altogether” (25). Against this Said proposes what he calls “secular criticism” that is marked by its quality of being “skeptical, secular, reflectively open to its own failings” and that is best expressed in the introspective form of the essay:

I hope it will not seem a self-serving thing to say that all of what I mean by criticism and critical consciousness is directly reflected not only in the subjects [of these essays] but in the essay form itself. For if I am to be taken seriously as saying that secular criticism deals with local and worldly situations, and that it is constitutively opposed to the production of massive, hermetic systems, then it must follow that the essay—a comparatively short, investigative, radically skeptical form—is the principal way in which to write criticism. (26)

This belief that the essay is democratically accessible for individuals and their particular and “worldly” experiences, has also led to a defense of the form in another area of pedagogical interest especially in the USA, that of Composition Studies. Composition Studies has developed consistently in the United States since the late nineteenth century and has become an integral part of the standard undergraduate and graduate level courses offered by most of the colleges and universities by now. Differently termed at other times as “composition-rhetoric” (or comp/rhet), “college composition” or “writing studies”, the concept and development of this unique area is inseparably related to the process of popularization and standardization of higher education in the United States through the twentieth century and the significance of the essay rises in the context of a major shift of orientation in the field that started in the 1960s.

The beginning of the establishment of composition studies as a compulsory course offered at a particular stage in college education started at Harvard University in the late nineteenth century. Before that, till about 1870s, college education in the USA consisted of mixed and unspecialized arrangements of few subjects like classics, mathematics and

science and hardly had any specific courses on literature or linguistics. Though instructions in writing always existed in some form or other (mostly based on traditional rhetoric), it was generally distributed over the whole academic period and did not exist as a specific course at a specific level in the curricula. Within 1900, however, America saw a complete change in its higher education because of the establishments of universities that led to availability of large number of varied disciplines and the consequent increase in the number of students. At this stage Harvard started the system of offering a specific writing instruction course at the first year of college education to students of all disciplines and through that measure took the first step towards systematizing the area of composition instruction (Brereton). The character of the area, however, was decided by the material conditions of teaching and the shape that it acquired by 1910 continued almost unchanged till the 1960s. Due to the requirement of teaching the same course to a huge and varied number of students within a very limited term there took place a process of what Robert J. Connors calls “winnowing down the scores of genres, stylistic qualities, taxonomies, forms, modes, levels and types into a tested usable set of teaching tools” (12). As a result the whole field of composition studies came to be represented by a few established textbooks that forwarded some set patterns and technicalities as the core of the subject. What was foregrounded was “formal and mechanical correctness” (13), the image of writing as a finished product produced by established rhetorical exercises and the idea of writing as exposition used to describe an objectively available reality. These became the basic tenets of what came to be called the “current-traditional rhetoric” and continued till the 1960s. Then a major wave of change touched composition studies in the form of theories that changed the emphasis to the idea of writing as a dynamic “process” determined by the varied and complex interactions between different individual and societal determinants. Predictably enough, the form in which such qualities of writing were found operating was the essay.

Almost like in the case of the article, the defenders of the essay form in writing instruction criticize the forms of expository writing traditionally used in the “current-traditional” paradigm on the ground that they exemplify a mechanically predetermined, rigid and narrow mode of exercise that implies, at a deeper level, the unquestioned

acceptance of a linear and over simplistic view of experience on the one hand and an axiomatic undemocratic ideology on the other. As an alternative the form of the essay is emphasized because of its experimental and dynamic character. Most importantly, however, the teachers of writing instruction in favor of the essay emphasize the importance of the form in terms of the humanitarian values it highlights. Kurt Spellmeyer for example sees the essay as the medium for making the students discover what he calls “the relationship of mutual implication, a relationship fundamental to all writing, between the self and the cultural heritage within which selfhood has meaning” (261). This is an important claim in favor of the essay because it shows the form to be capable of maintaining an ideal balance between the need of the individual student of finding his/her own personal voice, as well as of merging that voice in a dialogic interaction with the expressions of the discourse community of which he/she is a part. In other words, it reflects the belief in the form of the essay “as a kind of writing that reflects most openly the struggle of the individual writers to harmonize the conflicting demands of the self, language and experience” (Recchio 280). Due to this belief many composition experts and teachers make the essay a medium of experiments to find out the possibilities of expressing culturally distinctive versions of experience in students’ composition. Paul Heilker, for example, records a series of writing instructions where he used the essay instead of the traditional “thesis/support” form of exposition to engage students’ writing and claims to find a uniquely rich array of individual creative compositions. Heilker’s substitution of the essay for the “thesis/support” form is based on his belief that the essay is capable of carrying complexities and nuance of experience and expression that the other form can not:

The thesis support form is inadequate to the developmental, epistemological, ideological and feminine (and thus more fully humane) rhetorical needs of both students and instructors in the contemporary composition classroom. Some alternative form is clearly needed to address the weakness of the thesis/support form and meet these pressing theoretical and pedagogical needs. The essay, as distinguished from the

thesis/support form, is a form that can meet these various needs, that can truly foster students' continued development, embody the complexities of social epistemology, offer students an ideological counter-practice and incorporate a more fully human rhetoric. (*The Essay* 11)

At this point, it is also important to consider another aspect related to the conceptualization of the essay within Anglo-American essay criticism; it is the role of a formative influence on social and cultural identity that the essay is seen as fulfilling. The essay, in other words, is considered capable of performing some social and cultural responsibilities through its unique formal capacities. Such a conviction works at three levels. Firstly, the essayistic values like freedom, individuality, simplicity and familiarity are considered to be parts of a democratic and innovative world-view which is capable of building healthy lives, both of individuals and of nations. Whereas "The American Scholar" by Emerson, for example, is seen as the representative American essay capturing the nation's spirit in its essayistic form, Thoreau's *Walden* is considered a proof of the possibility of embodying those essayistic principles in the life of an individual. Secondly, the characteristic essayistic concern with the concrete and particular nuances of familiar existence is considered to be a healthy and much needed antidote to the growing self-centeredness and self-obsession of a rapidly growing "me-culture" (Atkins, *Tracing the Essay* 61). Essays like "Mowing of a Field" by Hilaire Belloc or "A Report in January" by E.B. White are seen as instances of the possibility that the apparently mundane familiarity of an unassuming essay can work as a principle of socio-cultural criticism through those very attributes (Atkins, *Familiar Essay* 12-13). Thirdly, a serious and subversive form of cultural criticism is seen as inherently yet latently present in the essay's familiar attribute whereby it is believed that "such a bypassing of abstractions, such an insistence on the concrete, is a politically subversive act" (Sanders 661)

This reference to the essay's familiar principle undertaking a kind of political subversion, or, the previous reference, in Heilker's comment, to the essay being "an ideological counter-practice" clearly echoes Adorno's comment on the essay being the "critique of

ideology”. In a curious way, then, Anglo-American essay criticism seems to reach an almost similar philosophical base for the essay’s form as that in German essay theory. Though one of these two reaches the conclusion by stressing on a critical side of the essay and the other on the creative, both of them ultimately reach almost similar conclusions about the essay as embodying an alternative discursive politics. However, unlike the German strand of essay criticism where the source of essay’s discursive and subversive alterity is located entirely in the ideology and concept of its form, in the Anglo-American lineage it is connected to the concept of individuality and creativity on the one hand and freedom and democracy on the other. In both the German and the Anglo-American tradition however the focus finally rests on the ideological resistance the essay is capable of carrying and the discursive functions it is capable of performing within disciplinary and cultural contexts specific to the respective societies.

2.2.3 Latin American Essay Criticism: Poetics of the Essay as Identity

A third distinctive tradition of essay writing and analysis is the Latin American tradition. Though for convenience of study it has been called a tradition of “criticism”, in comparison with the two previous traditions it looks more like a body of historical accounts of the form’s place and development within the broader area of Latin American literature and culture. The distinguishing mark of this approach is a strong awareness regarding the significance of the essay as a mode of socio-political speculation uniquely suited to the conditions of the nations in Latin America.

Shedding light on Latin American essays can be illuminating in the sense that it can make one aware of a different manifestation of the essay form and its potentiality. At the same time it can also open up possibilities of analyzing the form through perspectives different from the German and the Anglo-American traditions of essay criticism. The relation that these three traditions share within what can be called the precarious sphere of “essay theory” is, in fact, ironical. As has been seen, essay critics have always shared a persistent feeling that the form has been left out of the academic literary canon unduly,

has suffered academic negligence and has remained “a literary stepchild” (Glenn and Rodriguez 1). Whether it is Lukács or Adorno within The German tradition or Graham Good or G. Douglas Atkins within the Anglo-American one, they have all tried in their own ways to justify the enterprise of reassessing the form, of analyzing its potentialities and most importantly of broadening the standards of academic standardization to accommodate the essay. Curiously, however, in the process a strange unofficial canonization seems to have taken place within essay criticism itself whereby the first two traditions of essay theory have come to represent their standards as the standards of the whole field and has impeded the possibility of considering other traditions of essay writing with equal dedication. The comparative academic negligence in which the Latin American tradition finds itself is a result of this. Cristina Kirklighter locates what she calls “a gap” in essay scholarship in so far as, according to her, “the different emphases between essay scholarships have created academic divisions of study” and as a result of that Latin American essays and essay study has been neglected:

Although over two hundred books and articles have been written on the Latin American essay (some in English) and Latin America is globally known for its fine essayists, essay scholars in English departments according to my research findings very seldom cite these sources or essayists in their research. (4)

The reason lies in the character, form and function of the Latin American essay which appears to be entirely different from the image of the form within German and Anglo-American traditions of criticism. The essay in Latin America refers to a vast body of writing continuing from the late eighteenth century till the present, manifesting itself in many different shapes and styles and written not only by essayists but also by public intellectual, leaders, activists and also revolutionaries. What defines the essay within the Latin American context is not its form or content but its purpose or function. The birth and the development of the form took place against the background of the constant search for political and cultural identity that the Latin American countries have gone

through. It developed in response to the urgent need of speculation and debate on issues of national and cultural identity and was used extensively by thinkers and intellectuals for meeting such purposes so that it can be said that “the essay is the axis which has aligned the history of very country on the continent.” (Saunero-Ward 1684) Due to this unusual historical conjunction between the essay and the socio-political and cultural destiny of Latin America, the form has acquired a unique character of its own. The distinctive character of Latin American essay writing comes from its acute sense of grounding in the socio-political realities of the continent. All its manifestations share an ethos of situatedness and referentiality in relation to the immediate conditions of life there. Because of this the focus of study lies more on the issues of representation and responsibility in relation to external conditions than on the philosophical and abstract theorization on questions of form or the literary elements of style and self-expression.

Critics and historians of Latin American essays seem to be acutely aware of these distinctive traits and defend the identity of the essays by acknowledging them. Martin S. Stabb, one of the most well known historian and critic of the Latin American essay, commented in the introduction to his book *In Quest of Identity: Patterns in the Spanish American Essay of Ideas, 1890-1960* that the focus of his study “lies more in the area of ideas—of intellectual history set against the backdrop of the total culture—than it does in the area of literature per se” (qtd. in Kirklighter 72). The same emphasis on the issues of history, culture and identity in understanding the form is stressed by Doris Meyer in saying that “the essay genre in Latin America since the era of independence has been associated with an ongoing search for cultural and national identity” (ix). In other words, for these critics it is clear that to offer any just and complete analysis of the Latin American essay the point of focus has to be shifted from purely literary or discursive elements of form, style, creativity and authorship to the more concrete and communal aspects of history, politics and culture. In studying essayists like Martí, Rodó, Vasconcelos and Martínez Estrada, for example, Peter G. Earle found that it is more appropriate to call these essayists “historically committed thinkers” because their essays are marked by the urgency of foregrounding “combative ideological missions” because of which in their work “literary craftsmanship is relatively unimportant” (Earle 334). In

other words the essay in Latin America seems to have expressed itself in a unique history and culture specific manifestation. Commenting directly and yet poetically on the defining social and existential ethos that differentiates the Latin American essay from other essay traditions, Colombian historian, educator and political activist Germán Arciniegas comments:

In this America of ours, which is *mestizo*, not Latin, the novel arrives late, the theatre does not mature, but the essay flourishes. Because we are problematic, we must interpret ourselves When in the field of letters an essayist appears who discovers an angle on the problem that grips us—that of knowing who we are and where we are going—he is called “*Maestro*.” the essay in the United States becomes an optimistic synthesis of its own progress; it is a philosophy in which one sees the complacency of a healthy organism In contrast, the Latin American essay is a passage along the edge of an abyss . . . the depths from which we emerge place us in a tragic landscape. One cannot find as a theme for the essay anything more rich of contrasts, with more melancholy shadows, recondite secrets, and sharper crises—and with more hymns of hope and life. (78-81).

On the surface level the almost exclusive concern of the Latin American essay with the material realities of socio-political conditions and with the question of socio-cultural identity seems to lie at the other extreme from the abstract philosophical orientation of German tradition of essay criticism. It also looks entirely communal, impersonal and intellectual compared to the personal and creative manifestation of the form in Anglo-America. When looked deeply however it becomes clear that the Latin American essay has, at its root, one quality that is central to the form in general. This is nothing but the essay’s essential quality of being attached directly and transparently to the cultural and

material conditions of its inception, the “definite attentiveness to materiality” and “relation to a cultural moment” as Rachel Blau Duplessis calls it (24). The Latin American essay develops by centralizing this essayistic trait for negotiating the socio-historical moments of crisis in its search for identity. Unfortunately this avatar of the essay form has not been properly accommodated within German and Anglo American essay criticism. Claire de Obaldia, in her book on European philosophical essayism *The Essayistic Spirit: Literature, Modern Criticism and the Essay*, clearly comments that in the Latin American context “shortcomings for the study of the essay have to do . . . with the fact that they are more concerned with the ways in which the content of essays reflects the history of ideas and cultural identity of their countries than with the form itself” (61). Almost in a similar manner, the idea and image of the essay as an essentially personal and free creative form, foregrounded by Anglo-American essay criticism, has become so monolithic that, as Wendel Harris points out, “despite the variety of kinds” that marks the essay as form most critical studies “present the characteristics of the personal essay as though they were applicable to the whole genre” (935).

The problem has arisen out of the tendency to define and conceptualize the essay in its supposed essentiality, in one single manifestation. There is an irony in the fact because defenders of the essay religiously vouch for its extraordinary openness and flexibility, its capacity of going beyond established genre boundaries or its supposed status of an ‘anti-genre’. If essay’s distinctiveness lies in its drive against formal categorization (and in the Montaignian sense that is an ideological gesture as well as an epistemological stance) then every manifestation of the form has to be accommodated on its own ground in the structure of analysis meant for it. And such accommodation becomes possible if the form is seen more as a discourse performing ideological functions specific to the socio-discursive moment in which it is generated rather than as a static set of qualities that are expected to appear without change. Though there has been visible and serious differences among the manifestations as well as the understanding of the form in the three traditions of essay writing and essay criticism, what they have in common is a sense of relevance of the essay as a mode of discourse capable of meeting ideological needs specific to the socio-political, educational and cultural conditions of their societies. Focus on this

common point of relevance rather than on differences in terms of manifestation may lead to an ideal framework for studying the essay. Such a framework can maintain a balance between offering legitimate space to the different traditions of essay writing without overgeneralizing and paying attention to the strategies by which the existing structure of the essay as a form is adapted to meet the discursive needs specific to its conditions of practice. Within such a framework, in other words, space can be found for upcoming studies of many more traditions of essay writing.

2.3 In Perspective: The Indian English Essay

It is with the supposition of such a broad and inclusive framework that a possible attempt at studying the Indian English essay may be made. At the very outset it has to be conceded, however, that within the body of critical and historical analysis that has systematized Indian Writing in English as a distinctive literature and has placed it within a causal-developmental armature, the concept of “essay” as a form, attached with a generic and ideological philosophy, is entirely absent. Interestingly enough, on the other hand, this body of academic speculation has been predominantly genre bound since the beginning; Indian Writing in English has most commonly been studied in terms of the Indian English novel, Indian English poetry, Indian English drama and the like. With time other forms have been recognized and theorized—Indian English short story, Indian English autobiography and, in the recent times, Indian English travel writing and Indian English children’s literature etc. The recognition or theorization of essay as a form is almost entirely absent in his scheme.

We have seen in the context of Anglo-American and Latin American essays, the crucial function that historical accounts and anthologies can perform in bringing the essays into a visible frame in a way of forwarding them for academic reception. What is most commonly found in the canonical histories of Indian Writing in English like Arvind K. Mehrotra’s *An Illustrated History of Indian Literature in English* or M. K. Naik’s *A History of Indian English Literature*, is an all inclusive category of “prose” or “non-

fictional prose” that generally takes up stylistic analysis of individual texts. There seems to be a total absence of any historical or theoretical framework within which the Indian English essay can be located and analyzed as a genre. The same can be said of the limited number of anthologies that collect and bind their work, most commonly, under the category of “prose”. Anthologies like *Statements: An Anthology of Indian Prose in English* (1976), jointly edited by Adil Jussawalla and Eunice DeSouza, *Non-Fictional Indian Prose in English 1960-1990* (1998) edited by Shyamla Narayan or *Nineteenth Century Indian English Prose: A Selection* (2004) edited by Mohan Ramanan are invaluable in so far as they are the few rare instances of anthologized nonfictional writing in a literature otherwise predominated by interest in fiction. But they do not prove much helpful in attempts at situating the texts in the generic framework of the essay. This study tries to bring in the concept of the essay in an attempt to relocate these same works within the wide, flexible and yet discursively significant configurations provided by essay criticism discussed in the previous section.

Any study of Indian Writing in English has to go back to that point in history where the culture and language of the West and India came in contact through the process of colonization so that to understand the character of the literature an analysis of the political and historical realities of the times becomes unavoidable. It indicates the intrinsic relationship between the creative and the political in deciding the nature and history of this literature and also the undercurrents of material and discursive determinants behind its imaginary. Interestingly, out of all the manifestations of Indian Writing in English, the essay has been the one where this connection between literary creativity and material or political determination is the clearest. The significance of the essay in particular and prose writing in general in Indian Writing In English becomes all the more clear when it is placed against the practice of prose writings in the then current regional literatures or the ancient Indian literary traditions because there, as M.K. Naik points out in *Perspectives on Indian Prose in English*:

Prose had always been overwhelmingly poetic . . . and in the modern Indian languages also there was virtually no prose worth the name until

the example of English literature revealed the possibilities in this genre (223).

Essays have also been the most sensitive of the genres so far as their relation to socio-historical context is concerned so that the selection of subject matter, tone and writing style along with objectives and functions have developed according to the needs and requirements of the times. Hence, these essays have to be understood in terms of the functions they performed at various points in history rather than simply in terms of formal or thematic concerns. The idea of the essay as a form per se in the Montaignian sense of the term is not exactly applicable to the Indian English essay because of its close correspondence with the strands of public life affecting the country and its literature. (In this in fact the character of the Indian English essay can be seen as similar to that of the Latin American essays). Within Indian Writing in English it remains a genre related most closely to the public arenas of politics, journalism, activism and the like and these connections are apparent from the very beginning of the form.

The history of the form starts in the pre-Independence period. The pre-independence period saw the introduction of English as the language of the colonial masters and its subsequent transformation into the language of anti-colonial debates and negotiations in the hands of the Indians. After Macaulay's Minute in 1835 and Wood's Despatch in 1854, English became a part of the existing educational system of India; but more importantly for the young Indians it gradually became a channel of an interaction with the phenomenon of what is called Modernity as it developed in the West. Thus, from being only a language, English became a medium for cultural reorientation in India. This entire period, roughly from the last decades of the nineteenth century till the coming of Independence, was the time in which the Indian consciousness found itself negotiating and molding issues and concerns central to its past and present, its history and politics and its existence and identity. These negotiations occurred in the forms both of exchange of ideas between the Indian and the British sides and of reorientation of values within the Indian side itself. As a whole it was the intellectual and discursive ferment out of which Indian modernity was born and the language of English was the channel through which it

flowed. Mohan Ramanan remarks that “there is no doubt that the process of modernization, the process of forming ourselves into a nation, was facilitated by English” (2). And the form of expression that gave space to this process of negotiation was the essay. Of course, here the essay wears the garb of what can be called the formal essay; the appearance of the informal or personal essay would need to wait for another type of socio-cultural locale.

The first Indian English essay came from the pen of the man commonly called the “first modern Indian”- Raja Rammohan Roy. It was “The Defense of Hindu Theism” (1817). This was followed by essays on diverse social and political issues like “A Conference Between an Advocate for, and an Opponent of the Practice of Burning Widows Alive” (1819), “Address to Lord William Bentinck” (1830), “Letter on English Education” (1823), “Petitions Against the Press Regulations” etc. Roy was the first Indian to practice English writing so extensively and so confidently. His writings developed as Bruce Carlisle Robertson states “. . . from petition to polemic and finally exclusively to public instruction” (36). The essay, in this manifestation, is a public, utilitarian vehicle for mobilizing thought and opinions through the neat argumentative arrangement of understanding. It is factual, contemporary and purpose driven. Essays of this category found an increasing number amongst the nationalist intellectuals all over the country after it was so successfully utilized by Roy. The combination of the modern language of English and the form of the essay with its flexible and transparent character proved immensely helpful for these pioneers.

A second category of Indian English essays, a little different from the first one in interest and function came up in the early part of the twentieth century. By this time, the seeds of the socio political reforms introduced a generation earlier by Rammohan Roy and others had started showing results. What was the prerogative of few exceptional individuals in the nineteenth century became well organized social movements in the twentieth. The urge for modernizing the country through socio political reform led to the birth of societies and institutions like the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj. These societies did the function of turning a critical and reformative eye inwards, that is towards the past and

present of India itself and led to a mood of deep introspection and meditation. Once again it was the form of the essay that was found ready by the thinkers for their use. The essay's capacity to move freely from the particular to the general and its characteristic tendency of blending diverse and even contradictory strands of thought and ruminations made it the near perfect form for containing the surge of speculative thinking and expressions that flooded the country in this period. Two thinkers who took up the essay during this period were "Kobiguru" Rabindranath Tagore and Sri Aurobindo. Tagore's essays would include *Sadhana* (1913), *Personality* (1917), *Nationalism* (1917), *Creative Unity* (1922) and *Religion of Man* (1932). They blend serious philosophical thought with a clarity and lucidity of expression which has remained unique in Tagore's works. This is not the logical argumentative essay as introduced by Rammohan Roy, but an involved, deeply introspective expression touching the borders of poetry. Sri Aurobindo also was a veritable literary genius who produced a huge body of essays on diverse areas like religion and metaphysics, and on issues from the social, political, cultural and literary fields. These will include *New Lamps for Old* (1839), *Essays on the Geetha* (1922-1928), *The Life Divine* (1939) and many more. Significantly, Sri Aurobindo was also one of the first thinkers in whose hands the form of the Indian English essay got connected with the rising sphere of the press in India as he wrote many of his essays as part of his regular contributions to newspapers like the *Arya*, *Indu Prakash*. etc.

The two other most important writers of Indian English prose in general and the essay in particular in the pre-independence period were M.K. Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. As Sunil Khilani comments ". . . the forms in which they wrote—autobiographies, public and private letters, journalistic essays and articles and works of history—helped to define how these genres came to be understood and used in India, by their contemporaries and by those who came after" (136). Gandhi's essays include *The Indian Home Rule*(1910) (translation of *Hind Swaraj* done by Gandhi himself, written originally in Gujrati and published in 1909), his columns for *Young India* and *Indian Opinion* which he edited for a long time and *Satyagraha in South Africa* (serialized in Gujrati in *Navajivan* during 1924-25 and finally published in English translation in 1928). In Gandhi's hands these essays establish a very interesting connection between the public sphere of journalism

and the private one of confession. His trademark technique in writing was to move from the personal particular to the philosophical general and no other genre could have been more appropriate than the essay for this. This writing style had significant implications for later practitioners of the essay. Jawaharlal Nehru also had a remarkable talent for connecting the public and the private on the one hand and the objective and the subjective on the other. He combined history with personal expression in *Glimpses of World History* which he wrote in the forms of letters to his daughter. *The Discovery of India* was also written in the form of short independent essays which, taken together, give a linear description of the development of the Indian nation through history. Nehru's essays also accomplished the remarkable effect of simplifying and familiarizing the otherwise overly specialized area of public history. This could be understood against a rising trend in the West in the 1920s when intellectuals like Bertrand Russell and H.G.Wells were trying "to reach a wider audience" by popularizing areas like politics, history, philosophy science etc. (Khilani148).

As has been seen already, the essay as a genre has a unique quality of adapting itself according to the needs of the times. The pre-independence period was the time when the essay's function was primarily rhetorical as it was used by intellectuals and activists for meeting various socio-political needs. It was a form of writing that occupied a middle position between creative and journalistic literature and was generally public, utilitarian and topical in character. After independence, as the immediate causes for the socio political negotiations subsided, the essay came to acquire a more relaxed, personal and familiar air. From serious public issues it came down to ordinary day to day concerns and thus developed what can be called a tradition of familiar essays. The suitable medium for this type of essays was the newspaper or the magazine and by this time India had a sufficient number of them. It will not be correct to say, however, that the familiar essay didn't have any seriousness at all. Under the garb of its easy familiarity, this type of essay functioned as a form of social criticism aimed at the undercurrents of hypocrisy, orthodoxies, double standards and the like that were plaguing the developing modern Indian society. These essays that reached the ordinary Indian everyday through the press and talked about the issues relevant to their daily lives, actually aimed at smoothening

and chastening both social attitudes and personal conducts. They used humor and irony to send their message across in a friendly and light-hearted way and selected most easy and everyday subject matters to finally lead on to speculations of more serious nature. Undoubtedly these are influenced by the western masters of the familiar essay like Addison, Lamb, A.G. Gardiner, Beerbohm etc. but as they are about typically Indian concerns their Indian character is unmistakable. Unfortunately, description or analysis of this unique category of essays is completely absent in works of criticism dealing with Indian Writing in English. The only and rare exception is B. R. Kulkarni's *Indian English Essay: A Critical Study* (1998) which provides an exhaustive account of the nearly forgotten Indian English familiar essayists and their works.

The beginning of this subtype of the Indian English essay can be traced back to the pre-independence period, though it flowered in the 1930s onwards. The earliest instances consist of simple character sketches that tried to capture the typical and peculiar in the Indian character. Behramji Merwanji Malabari, who contributed immensely to the development of journalism in India and edited *East and West* and *Indian Spectator*, had two collections titled *Gujrat and Gujratis* (1882) and *Rambles of a Pilgrim Reformer or the Indian Eye on English Life* (1893) where he combined social criticism with the form of travel essays. These were short descriptive pieces that mingled humorous character sketches, incidents and anecdotes. He used irony, parody, and wit as necessary and used acute observation to point out the serious, hidden significances lying behind apparently humorous and ordinary practices. Malabari was immediately followed by Nagesh Vishwanath Pai in his *Stray Sketches in Chakmapore* (1894). This was a collection of thirty six pen portraits of Indian character types. Chakmpore was used as an imaginary site reflecting the city of Bombay towards the end of the Nineteenth century in particular and the Indian city and its life in general. It was a concept that was derived from the western masters of the familiar essay and influenced the later practitioners of the form in India. An instance was K. S. Venkatramani's *Paper Boats* (1921). This consisted of ten light humorous sketches of social and religious life in rural South India that included essays like "The Indian Beggar", "The Fisherman", "My Grandmother", " My Neighbour", etc. The influence of Lamb and Gardiner is unmistakably present in these

essays and with them the can be marked the beginning of the Indian English Essay in the personal and familiar vein (Kulkarni 31).

However, these were sporadic instances of the form which still had not received any consistent treatment from anyone. In the next stage, since the late 1930s, a group of writers emerged who contributed familiar essays in a regular and consistent manner and can be called 'essayists' as such. Three most prominent of these were S.V. Vijayraghavachariar (popularly known as S.V.V.), K. Ishwara Dutt and N.G. Jog. S.V.V. can be termed the first successful familiar essayist in Indian Writing in English. He published a number of books of familiar essays that included *Soap Bubbles* (1931), *More Soap Bubbles* (1932), *Chaff and Grain* (1934), *Much Daughtered* (1938), *Mosquitoes at Mambalam* (1958), etc. He wrote most of his essays for famous newspapers and magazines like the *Hindu*, *Everyman's Review* and *The Illustrated Weekly* etc. and introduced the Indian readership to the nuances of the form of the familiar essay. Kunduri Ishwara Dutt also was an editor by vocation who had two books of familiar essays to his credit titled *And All That* (1931) and *Middles* (1959). Dutt perfected the familiar essay to the level where it elicited the praise of none other than A.G. Gardiner himself (32). Almost the same can be said about N.G.Jog, the former editor of *Bombay Chronicle* and *Indian Express*. He authored a collection of twenty delightful essays titled *Onions and Opinions* (1944). Like S.V.V. and K. Ishwara Dutt, Jog also concentrated on the most ordinary looking aspects of daily life to illuminate the hidden philosophical significances through humor and irony. It is important to mention that these three essayists were only the most visible and popular amongst large number of writers who turned to the essay in the lighter vein at this time and used the space provided by the newspapers and magazines extensively to perfect their art. The list will include the names of R. Bangaruswami, M.L. Malhotra, V.V. John, Shushil Mukherjee, Sisir Kr.Ghosh, Ved Mehta, Khuswant Singh, Jug Surayia etc.

The evaluation of these essays is a little difficult because there seems to be a difference between their surface level appearance and their significance in terms of their contextual and historical positioning. They do not seem to have any value in so far as their subject

matter or art is concerned because they were extremely topical and hence had a very small span of life. But their appearance and popularity, at this particular juncture in history of Indian Writing in English, is itself a phenomenon that has to be seen and understood against a broader context. The fact that a literary form written in English that solely concentrated on reaching the ordinary middle class Indian on a day to day basis is actually an indicator of the extent to which English as a language and Indian Writing in English as a literature had acquired maturity. It was no longer the occasional elite space of creativity and expression that was bound to specific causes and scholarly reception; rather it had become a part of the easy, regular, daily life of the ordinary Indian. This is the beginning of a course of development that led the form of the Indian English essay to a secure and independent position as a form of writing in the later years. The popularity of the essay invited many established writers to try out this new form and their involvement enhanced the maturity of the same (The ideological and discursive significance of this apparently inconsequential manifestation of the essay form will be studied in relation to its exposition by R. K. Narayan in the next chapter).

Following this line of development, the later decades of the twentieth century saw the essay emerging as a unique space where a lot of creative experiments might take place. This was the time when because of the rising complexities in life in general and also because of a general awakening of a humanitarian and democratic ethos of thinking all over the globe, the question of literary value came to be assessed more in terms of the relationship writing has with life rather than in terms of categorization or generic conformity. The time was found suitably ripe for different kinds of experiments with genre boundaries and for writers taking up interest in issues and concerns deeper and broader than the simply literary. Now, for any expression that tries to go beyond the conventional categories of fiction and non-fiction or literary and extra-literary, the essay proves the best medium. This is one of the reasons why in the present times more and more creative writers are turning to the essay. They have exploited the freedom, the space and the variety that the essay offers in different ways and have come up with writings which are fresh and challenging at the same time. A very interesting development is the remarkable trend of involvement of established creative writers of fiction in essay writing

in increasing numbers. This implies their involvement in different socio-political issues and their use of the essay as a vehicle for the reflections and interrogations that such involvements demands. In other words the essay has become a favored space for the writers to express themselves in the capacity of not simply creative writers but intellectuals. In their hands the essay has come to acquire a new look with elements of thought and imagination, enquiry and reflection, objective analysis and subjective treatment all mingled up. At the same time they also have enriched the genre by bringing in aesthetic elements from as many different fields of knowledge and creativity as possible thereby making the essay a hybrid, multilayered, extremely innovative form of writing where the taste of travel, journalism, political commentary, sociological debate, personal narratives, memoirs all are found. Amit Chaudhuri's *Small Flat Oranges*, Jayanta Mahapatra's *Doors of Paper*, Shashi Deshpande's *Writing from the Margins* etc. are all collections of essays that belong to this category.

This, undoubtedly, is an extremely limited account of the Indian English essay as it has exited silently and unrecognized till now. Almost like the Latin American essay, within the Indian English context also essay has manifested itself more by following the ground realities and needs of the society and time of its inception than by following any model of origin. It is easy to see that because Indian Writing in English has followed the canonical genre divisions of western, or more specifically, English literary studies, its focus of interest has been guided by attention to the traditional "major" genres. But as the standards of literary analysis are gradually changing and the essay is gradually gaining grounds in terms of critical reception, moves towards taking up the Indian English essay can be seen implying not only a justified venture in favor of the form but also as a part of the necessary process of renewal for the standards of the literature as a whole.

R. K. Narayan, Amitav Ghosh and Arundhati Roy are the three writers that this study has selected to channelize such an endeavor. The selection might look a little problematic in view of the fact that that all the three writers have already been academically established and canonized as major novelists who have contributed to the development of Indian English fiction in the capacity of pioneers. However, it is this very mechanism of

establishing an essential connection between the practice of a “major” literary form (in this case the novel) and the canonical status of a writer and his/her work that needs to be questioned to put forward any defense against the essay’s supposed “minor” status. It means that the established line of focus approaching the writers through the overloaded body of criticism on their fiction is redirected towards their substantial but completely ignored body of essays. Such a redirection will reveal that the issue of academic marginalization of the essay—a persistent, unavoidable and characteristic concern for any study of the genre—is most clearly and visibly represented in the status of the essay texts of writers otherwise canonized in terms of their practice of “major” genres. It is a level of marginalization where these texts are sidelined not only as belonging to a minor genre but as also representing a creative practice necessarily secondary to the major endeavor of writing fiction—a kind of double marginalization. However the very presence of such acute marginalization may work as a route to locating and understanding the causes, grounds and frameworks that maintain such practice of academic canonization/marginalization of genres and this in its turn may point towards channels for locating the remedies of the situation. The next chapter of this study will attempt to negotiate these concerns in relation to the familiar essays of R. K. Narayan—the prolific legendary novelist and the equally prolific but hardly known essayist.