Chapter 1

Political Fiction Re-defined

Political fiction is a fairly new form of literary expression which has come into vogue in the post-War period of the twentieth-century. The sensibilities of a group of responsive writers who were disturbed by the atrocities perpetrated by power-hungry fascist regimes, found eloquent expression in new fictional patterns woven around political themes. Their works were characterized by an intricately patterned interlocking of political ideology and existential concerns. They focused on the impact of power politics on the hopes, fears and angst of the post-atomic humanity. The dominant issues of the contemporary world associated with economics, war, race, gender and justice also found ample space in their creative exuberance.

Any attempt to define a political novel will be problematic since it does not represent a distinct form of fiction. The line of demarcation between art and politics has become unusually thin in the twentieth-century. A writer of political fiction may find it difficult to put life, art and politics into watertight compartments. At an extreme level, any novel that evinces the close relationship
between literary imagination and socio-political reality can be called ‘political’. It envisions a multidimensional picture of the society with all its discrepancies and vicissitudes.

Political novel is a direct descendant of the nineteenth-century social novel which gave a realistic reflection of the contemporary social life. Gradually there emerged a shift in emphasis in the social novels from the gradations within the society to the fate of the society itself. The major practitioners of this altogether new expressive mode turned their imaginative lens to the interpretation of emotion and ideology which prompted them to support or oppose the society. In a political novel, the idea of the society immensely influences the consciousness of the characters in all its profoundly problematic aspects. The actions and behaviour of the characters are determined by some coherent political loyalty or ideological identification. It gives an illuminating portrayal of individuals caught in the whirlpool of power game; striving to evolve strategies for survival in a hostile, regimented and unpredictable environment. The writers’ major preoccupation will be to diagnose and analyze the ambivalence of social justice. They manipulated this fictional mode and turned it into a viable medium for exploring the political experience and blended it with literary imagination. They made a thorough study of human character against the backdrop of political thought, ideas and events.
Numerous critics have tried to give diverse interpretations to the term ‘political fiction’. Morris Edmund Speare is perhaps the earliest critic who tried to give a satisfactory definition. In his pioneering work, *The Political Novel: Its Development in England and America* (1924), Speare elucidates:

> It is a work of prose fiction which leans rather to “ideas” than to “emotions”; which deals rather with the machinery of law-making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation; and where the main purpose of the writer is party propaganda, public reform, or exposition of the lives of the personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. (ix)

Using this definition as an axis, Speare traces the history of political fiction in his work. He looks upon the political novel as a modified form of the historical novel and the political novelist as one disinclined to use common humanity and its emotions as his raw materials.

Orville Prescott classifies the political novel into two distinct categories in *In My Opinion: An Inquiry into the Contemporary Novel* (1952). He opines:

> There are two principal varieties of political fiction: novels about characters involved in politics and so about politics
themselves; and novels designed to persuade their readers to share their author’s political convictions, novels which are primarily propaganda pamphlets. (22-23)

Joseph Blotner, an American critic in *The Political Novel* (1955) observes that a political novel “. . . directly describes, interprets or analyzes political phenomena” (2). This assumption was based on the impact of the work on the reader. Like most of the definitions based on the reader-response, this one also is restricted in its scope and usefulness.

Perhaps the most significant and influential study on political fiction is contained in Irving Howe’s *Politics and the Novel* (1957). He avoids a rigid classification of the political fiction and considers the novels in which politics plays a vital role as political fiction. Howe argues that the political novel points to a significant emphasis in the writer’s subject or in his attitude towards it. And this emphasis would have to do with the relation between political ideas and the experience of the characters. It gives lyrical expression to the way in which politics increasingly affects the human behaviour and feeling. The political novel also absorbs into its stream of sensuous impression, the hard and perhaps insoluble pellets of modern ideology. Ideas are made to have their own independent motion so that they become active characters in a political fiction. These ideas are set in motion in such a way that
they become the imperious necessity against which the human character is pressed.

Howe comments on the concept of the political novel: “By a political novel I mean a novel in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting” (17). The identification of the ideas and the milieu which govern the political nature of a novel depends on the perspective adopted by the reader. A crystallization of this awareness is manifest in Howe’s apparently enigmatic assertion that he meant by a political novel any novel he wished to treat as if it were a political novel. But the uniqueness of his theory lies in his critical belief that a political novel requires the intermingling of the political ideas and the emotions of characters who uphold these ideas.

The conflict in a political novel is created by a judicious interaction between the will of the individuals and the realm of impediments. That realm arises out of a combination of external circumstances and the ideas that erect an imposing perception of the circumstances. It assumes the role of a major determining force in provoking the reader into an involved thinking of the issues the writer wishes to highlight in these novels. Howe’s comments about the preoccupations of a political novelist are pertinent:

Like a nimble dialectician, the political novelist must be able to handle several ideas at once, to see them in their hostile
yet interdependent relations and to grasp the way in which ideas in the novel are transformed into something other than the ideas of a political program. (21)

Howe is also aware of the supreme challenges faced by a political novelist when he records:

To the degree that he is really a novelist, a man seized by the passion to represent and to give order to experience, he must drive the politics of or behind his novel into a complex relation with the kinds of experience that resist reduction to formula-and this once done, supreme difficulty though it is, transforms his ideas astonishingly. His task is always to show the relation between theory and experience, between the ideology that has been preconceived and the tangle of feelings and relationships he is trying to present. (21-22)

Gordon Milne came out with his famed work The American Political Novel in 1966. He argues that the political novels in America concentrated on the presence of political ideas and political milieu. Milne labels these novels ‘reformist’. But he has limited the scope of study by choosing only American novels.

Michael Wilding in his remarkable work Political Fictions (1980) contests the theory propounded by Howe and provides a critical perspective which more or less belonged to the realistic tradition.
According to him a political novel should also be a novel of society, of history, a Utopian fantasy or a fable. Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* (1981) considers the relevance of political interpretation of literary texts as the absolute horizon of all reading.

Robert Alter in his brilliant study *The American Political Novel* (1984) divides the political novel into two classes—the conventional political novel and the adversary political novel. The former one presumes that all is well with the Republic in spite of the troubling agitation of the surface. And the latter presents a Republic which is rotten to the core. Alter considers characters as a medium that leads one to reflect life on the ultimate purpose and meaning of individual life. He attempts to give a comprehensive definition to political fiction when he states:

> The novel’s great strength as a mode of apprehension is in its grasp of character, and the political novel at its best can show concretely and subtly what politics does to character, what character makes of politics. (42)

Robert Boyers, a modern American critic, in his *Atrocity and Amnesia: The Political Novel Since 1945* (1985) comments:

> . . . the political novel is always in some unmistakable way an engagement with the common world, and its sense of that world is communicated in the attention it pays to present
things. Characters in such a work may feel contempt for everything around them, may live only for the future, but they are inevitably presented to us as belonging to a here and now that occupies us more than any vision of the future can. (18)

According to Boyers, a political novel should have something to do with ideas about the community and the distribution of power. There are certain generic constraints identified by the critics of political novels. In a political novel, personal conflicts are organized into political conflicts. Political novelists are concerned with actual or threatened disappearance of established forms. Characters in a political novel regard their personal fates as intimately connected with the social and political arrangements. The common world that is attempted to be created in the novel is a projection of hope and a movement towards a world that might exist in the mind of the protagonist.

*The Language of Fiction in a World of Pain: Reading Politics as Paradox* (1990) by Barbara J. Eckstein evinces the separation between art and politics. She opines that “. . . fiction is political and interpretation a necessarily political act” (6). She also endeavors “. . . to stipulate a definition of politics, from "literary" and "political" sources, and to present a method for reading politics in contemporary fiction” (6).
Michael Hanne in *The Power of the Story: Fiction and Political Change* (1994) discusses at length the political impact of a fictional text. Hanne remarks: “. . . any serious assessment of the political “impact” of any work must focus on the effects it has on an already existing power relation” (5). *Literature and the Political Imagination* (1996) edited by Andre T. Baumeister and John Horton considers political theory as too impure and insufficiently abstract to be considered as a genuine philosophy. They argue that its identity has always remained uncertain and shadowy.

The novels in which political ideas play a dominant role will have a very pointed attitude towards time. This attitude to time is intricately linked with the idea of Being. Being stands for those things that already exist which is in sharp contrast to things that are imagined or imperfectly remembered. A novel that does not have any political leaning treats the present circumstance as non-problematic and also reckons it to be the sole reality. Instead, a political novel attempts comparisons between the past and the present. Boyers records:

A political novel will assume an attitude toward time because it will treat Being itself as problematic. Radical or conservative in outlook, it will project Being as an arrangement of objects, persons, and institutions in a world that has undergone change and may undergo change again.
It is haunted by time because it concerns itself with arrangements that it knows to be impermanent, whatever the wishes of those who would like to believe otherwise. (18)

A political novelist’s interest in politics is a reflection of his concern for the way things would happen; in the way he would confront and overcome problems, and the resistance he might face at amelioration. Political novels demand an ethical interpretation of thought, though literary theorists deny that there cannot be a valid ethical criticism. Ethical thought projects an ideal vision of the way in which people ought to behave. The consideration of ethics in the political novel is also necessarily a reflection of its capacity to project a sense of what an acceptable political culture might be. They generate an implicit ethics in terms of which the narrative material may be understood.

Political novels usually embody an absent cause which implies that while a novel may offer us an awareness of what we need to know, it will never project that knowledge. The awareness of this ‘absent cause’ is evoked by the appeal such novels make to the political unconscious. And that unconscious is a mixture of narratives and narrative codes. Fredric Jameson observes:

The Political unconscious turns on the dynamics of the act of interpretation and presupposes, as its organizational fiction, that we really confront a text immediately in all its freshness
as a thing in itself. Rather, texts come before us as the always-already-read, we apprehend them through sedimented layers of previous interpretations, or-if the text is brand new-through the sedimented reading habits and categories developed by those inherited interpretive traditions. (9)

Political novels do not embody the master codes or narrative paradigms in pure form. They are a far cry from the traditional domestic novels which work comfortably within a single narrative convention. It does not operate on the assumption that Being itself is problematic. Political novel is concerned with actual or threatened disappearance of established forms.

Taking the cue from the various theories suggested by these critics, it can be inferred that a ‘political novel’ is a literary piece which gives a fictional treatment of politics, economics and culture and also depicts its effect on the saga of human existence. In such a novel, action, character and setting are firmly grounded in politics. Stendhal’s *The Charterhouse of Parma* (1839), Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* (1871), Conrad’s *Nostromo* (1904), Andre Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* (1933), Arthur Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* (1940), Albert Camus’ *The Plague* (1947) and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949) are some of the earlier novels which come under the category of political fiction.
Stendhal’s *Charterhouse of Parma* presents a brilliant portrayal of a character caught in the flux of power politics. The novel with its narrative capaciousness and integrity gives a poetic reconstruction of the political world. The very patterns of Stendhal’s prose seem emblematic of the political situation. It shows how politics fits into a larger vision of the human condition.

Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* is hailed as the true representative political fiction in the nineteenth century. It was written with the explicit purpose of excommunicating all beliefs that find salvation anywhere but in the Christian God. Dostoevsky rejected all forms of material progress which he believed would take mankind away from God. It is based on a political uprising in Czarist Russia. A serious political commentary, *The Possessed* turns apolitical as it carries the notion that redemption is possible to sinners who have suffered greatly.

Conrad’s *Nostromo* is yet another novel which belongs to this genre. Costaguana, the fictional Latin American country in which the action is set, parallels Stendhal’s Parma. The novel reveals the dynamics of political authority in human existence.

Andre Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* was set in the backdrop of the Chinese Revolution while Koestler’s *Darkness at Noon* portrays the atrocities of the Soviet totalitarianism and the decay of the Russian
revolutionary ideals. Camus too opposed the repressive effect of totalitarianism and absolutism in *The Plague*.

George Orwell’s major works, *Animal Farm* (1945) and *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, stand out as supreme examples of his devastating attack on totalitarianism. Both are allegories of the Soviet Union; *Animal Farm* is about Russian Revolution and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* about Stalinism. *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is considered as the landmark novel that divides the political fiction into pre and post Orwellian. Orwell is at par with Jonathan Swift and Aldous Huxley in his caricaturization of persons and events, though he lacks the genteel humour of Huxley. In his novel, Orwell prophetically envisions a bleak future for mankind. It is interesting to note that the contemporary realities have gone far beyond the clairvoyant prophecy of the author of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the novel that stands as a milestone in the history of political fiction. Orwell had a tremendous impact on the English vocabulary as well. The contamination of language which was one of Orwell’s obsessive concerns has gone to farther reaches with newer triumphs of propaganda using the high-tech style, sinking daily into our linguistic habits.

Political fiction has undergone tremendous metamorphosis since the publication of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. The post-Orwellian political fiction shows remarkable diversity and complexity and is
characterized by multiplicity of intentions and an intermingling of political ideology, human aspirations and sentiments. C. Gopinathan Pillai comments:

The post-Orwellian universe is murky and one of unrelieved gloom and grotesqueness. The horror of collectivization and depersonalization which lay at the heart of Orwell’s troubled warning has deepened in recent times with an interlocking military-industrial complex taking control over the destinies of vast populations on earth. Forms of “thought control” dreadfully portrayed by Orwell in his novel have been surpassed by the sophisticated energy and volume of disinformation channelled through various communication systems. (16)

Hence post-Orwellian political fiction calls for an altogether new critical approach. The post-War climate of Europe sparked off numerous literary talents who made bold attempts at fictional experiments. They expressed their deeply felt sentiments against totalitarianism and political oppression through innovative fictional strategies. These extremely talented groups of writers broke all the traditional and time honoured paradigms of fictional rendering. Their apprehensions about the profound human tragedy assume challenging shapes in their revolutionary works. The powerful narrative structures sought to deglamourize the past and the
present the political reality in all its dreadful manifestations. They ruthlessly punctured the bubbles of illusion of contemporary life and bluntly revealed the horrors of existence. The myths of social equality were blasted in order to expose the grotesque and disgusting face of humanity. These novelists presented characters who are disappointed, disillusioned and are committed to political goals and ideals. Ideology, that provides the motivation for their actions, merges with the emotion generated by the novel, as it proceeds to undertake the description and interpretation of human experiences. The intricately patterned interweaving of political ideas and human predicament in such works contributed to their complexity and virtuosity.

Modern political novelists devised new artistic strategies for presenting the dismal realities of the post-War world, for they found the existing ones not powerful enough to depict the intensity of their emotions. The new strategies invented were employed to demystify and shock the readers out of their complacency. Quite a few authors belonging to this school of fictionalization experimented with diverse stylistic techniques. Robert Boyers exclaims:

. . . the intentions at issue are so much more various in these writers than in the early twentieth-century novelists studied by Howe that one must find new ways of discussing them. No
theory of the political novel that installs Orwell or Koestler as a representative figure is likely to know what to make of *The Tin Drum* or *Autumn of the Patriarch.* (6)

Strategies of demystification like deconstruction, subversion, several variations of fantasy, metafiction, magic realism, parody, satire, allegory etc. were employed extravagantly by these novelists. Their works were often characterized by repetitiveness and circularity. Expressive devices of polyphony and magic realism lend new interpretive possibilities to these political novels. The potential of language too was exploited for a better articulation of the existential hopes and fears. They attempted a new hybridization of language by mingling slangs and colloquial expressions in the vernacular with Standard English and in this process achieved an aesthetically satisfying linguistic defamiliarization. The new aesthetics of demystification employed in the multiple narrative convention of the modern political novels, necessitates new paradigms for critical analysis.

The post-Orwellian political novelists were mainly concerned with the politics of despair, despotism, atrocity and degeneration. They gave powerful fictional dimension to their intensely felt emotions by deftly using new stylistic devices. They discarded the conventional methods as inadequate to depict the bizarre world they wanted to project. Some of the prominent novelists who
enriched the political fiction through unconventional expressive modes are Alexander Solzhenitsyn, Gunter Grass, Gabriel García Márquez, Alejo Carpentier, Nadine Gordimer, Graham Greene, V. S. Naipaul and Milan Kundera.

Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s novels are startling national epics of Russia. He presents the suppressed history of a vicious epoch and delineates the system that deformed or destroyed the lives of millions. His novels are replete with horrible images of the squalor of Russian rural life; the all pervasive ugliness, the lies of the press, the destruction of churches, degradation of peasant life and so on. His fiction projects a political vision that human beings require minimally to have a decent living. The major works of Solzhenitsyn includes *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), *The First Circle* (1964), and *Cancer Ward* (1966). The second phase of Solzhenitsyn’s writings includes *August 1914* (1972) and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1974). *One Day* gives a graphic picture of the Soviet prison camps. *The First Circle*, one of the greatest political novels documents the vast bureaucracy operating in the main as a terror network controlled by Joseph Stalin. The Stalin of Solzhenitsyn is in no sense a benevolent despot though he tells himself that he acts for the sake of humanity, to lead it to happiness. *The First Circle* reflects the dynamics of totalitarian power of extreme variety. The novelist treats Stalinism as an unchanging phenomenon and
argues that no development or progress is possible in an oppressive order. Solzhenitsyn is primarily concerned with denouncing the spiritual evil of Stalinism.

Gunter Grass; the German poet and novelist, who lived through the Nazi era and survived the War, became the literary spokesman of his generation. Grass had a unique way of mixing the political with the fictional as if they were inseparable. He made his characters a part of history and posed the question whether they were controlled by social and political forces beyond their control, or were driven by their own free will. Salman Rushdie comments on the inter-relatedness of politics and literature in the works of Grass:

"... when Grass writes about literature he finds himself writing about politics, and when he discusses political issues, the quirky perspectives of literature have a habit of creeping in. (IH 281)"

Grass’ novels *The Tin Drum* (1959), *Cat and Mouse* (1961) and *Dog Years* (1963) deal with the rise of Nazism and are collectively known as the Danzig Trilogy. *The Tin Drum* makes good use of magic realism as a narrative device. The novel deals with issues that are fundamentally political. Grass imaginatively distorts and exaggerates his personal experiences and presents them through the protagonist named Oskar, who like his creator, belonged to the
Danzig area. The novel presents a three dimensional picture of the
Danzig area with its sights, sound and smells, the gradual
Nazification of average German families, ethnic bigotries and the
attrition of the war years.

The modern history of Latin America is punctuated with
perennial thirst for blood, long heritage of social exploitation and
grim picture of silent tolerance. Winds of modernity and
technological advance have not yet swept away their hard and
simple ways of living and their belief in magic and miracles. The
imaginative minds of the Latin American novelists were stimulated
by the abuse of the rich cultural tradition of their native land by
the brutal forces of power politics. The novels of Gabriel García
Márquez and Alejo Carpentier are the poetic transcription of the
contemporary reality of Latin America. Márquez’s *One hundred
Years of Solitude* (1970) portrays the saga of a tribe and the history
of hundred years in the life of a family. The novel assumes epic
dimensions with the multitudes of characters and events.

*The Autumn of the Patriarch* (1975) is a typical Latin American
political novel that has flouted the decorums associated with a well
made novel. It identified the cult of the dictator as a principal
source of the misery and destitution endemic in Latin America. The
novel expresses the author’s apprehensions about the devastating
effect of excessive technocratization of Latin American society. New
fictional strategies were employed by these writers to depict the long history of horrors. The interminable sentences are synonymous with the perpetual tyranny. The prose style is noted for its maturity and ornate profligacy. Márquez’s concept of the devastation caused by the dehumanized political power is cocooned inside a strange folktale which speaks for all created things.

Alejo Carpentier’s major political novel, *Reasons of State* (1977) asks a variety of political questions and proposes to engage them politically. His literary focus is on the westernization of the Latin American society.

Nadine Godimer’s political novels express the notion that a person is nothing but the position he occupies in a given political system even though the author is not so keen in depicting the idea of power politics. She is more interested in the microscopic details of individual behaviour and sentiments. But her characters are intricately related to the collective consciousness and political situations typical of their societies. *A Guest of Honour* (1970), *The Conservationist* (1974) and *Burger’s Daughter* (1979) are her major works of fiction. Among them, *Burger’s Daughter* stands out as one of the best political novels of our time. It is a political novel in the sense that its most fully elaborated narrative situations are destined to engage political questions.
Graham Greene is widely regarded as a writer who dealt with religious issues rather than political themes. His creative genius was shaped by the tragedy of Europe in the 1930’s, the Depression, the rise of Fascism and so on. He believed in the autonomy of literature and did not try to patronize political leanings in creative writings. Greene upheld the conviction that the writer must maintain his independence, taking no orders from the State or from any party or creed. Marie Beatrice Mesnet’s comment is worth recalling in this regard:

In a society organized either badly or too well, one in which technology, planning and the growing power of government increasingly threaten individual freedom, one in which the totalitarian exploitation of men and ideas is widespread in both the Communist state and the welfare state (although less noticeably so in the latter), Greene has argued that the writers’ duty is to accept no special privilege from the state. (100)

Greene’s novels which dealt mainly with catholic issues are *Brighton Rock* (1938), *The Power and the Glory* (1940), *The Heart of the Matter* (1948) and *The End of the Affair* (1951); and those which could be considered as political fiction are *The Quiet American* (1955), *The Comedians* (1966) and *The Honorary Consul* (1973). According to Greene, politics is interesting only because it relieves people of the tedium of settled pursuits and not because it
promises an alleviation of human misery. C. Gopinathan Pillai opines on Greene’s art:

It has always been Greene’s technique to make great use of the introspective recollections of his characters under the provocation of free association of dream incidents and childhood fantasies, to illuminate the past of the characters as well as to develop their personalities. In his political novels, this technique provides what is called psychological subjectivities. (25)

V. S. Naipaul’s witty and morally bracing style created memorable characters who inhabited an essentially political world. He is pessimistic in his approach while dealing with disorder and breakdown. His major political novels are The Mystic Masseur (1957), A House for Mr. Biswas (1961) and A Bend in the River (1979). The last one is the only one written in the great tradition of western political fiction. His prose style is praised for its Augustan poise and pellucid quality. Robert Boyers evaluates Naipaul:

He did outgrow the local color satirical novels of his youth and he has sometimes seemed to be moving deliberately toward a kind of political fiction that would set him more squarely in the tradition of Conrad and Stendhal than in the line of Caribbean and third world writers with whom he is often compared. (33)
Milan Kundera represents the voice of the Czechoslovakian psyche crushed under the dehumanized totalitarian regime. He gives fictional record of the different facets and phases of Czech history. Major works of Kundera include *The Joke* (1967), *The Farewell Party* (1976), *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1979), *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (1984) and *Immortality* (1991). Kundera’s obsessive concern with the interrelation between the political and the personal is evident in all his works. He puts political and historical facts into the crucible of his imagination and disturbs readers with probing questions on the enigma of existence.

These writers may be considered as the prominent chroniclers of the anguish of humanity entrapped by the modern power politics. In spite of national and cultural variations, they employ identical techniques of demystification to spin their fictional webs and attempt the interlocking of the personal and the political.

The burgeoning national and political consciousness in India which was slowly permeating to the grass roots has been faithfully mirrored in the Indian English fiction as well. The umbilical connection between fiction and political consciousness was an important factor which enabled the early writers to fashion political fiction. The essence of nationalism that influenced every section of the Indian society during the time of Gandhi and the freedom movement provided a most conducive environment for the
development of the political novel. About the countries with a long history of political subjugation, Alvarez records:

Nationalism becomes a preoccupation of writers. They are important not just for their art but also as teachers, helping the nation to an awareness of itself, its aspirations, and its troubles. (10)

The resurgence of political sensitivity and the sense of nationalism resulted in the re-generation and a re-discovery of the indigenous culture and tradition. Early Indian English political novelists were steeped in nationalist euphoria. Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Bhabani Battacharya, R. K. Narayan, Kamala Markandaya, Khushwant Singh, Manohar Malgonkar, Chaman Nahal, K. A. Abbas, Nayantara Sahgal etc. belonged to this group. The pre-Independence Indo-Anglian novels portrayed a faithful picture of the freedom movement, the Gandhian ideology and its impact on the society whereas the novels written after independence emerge as an interrogation of political ideology and a questioning of social and political conditions of the country.

Mulk Raj Anand casts his imaginative net rather extensively and captures the major political events of the period such as the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Simon Commission, the exploits of the revolutionaries abroad etc. Through his major works like Untouchable (1935), Coolie (1936) and Two Leaves and a Bud
(1937), Anand seeks to awaken a new consciousness by highlighting the economic hardships and emotional humiliation encountered by the people belonging to the lower strata of the society. He poses subtle questions on the relevance of freedom when individual liberty is denied in a politicized society.

Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) captures the entire gamut of the Gandhi phenomenon. The novel gives an authentic fictional rendering of all the major movements launched by Gandhi in the 1930’s and thus it represents the very spirit of the age. Presenting an ingenious blend of myth and history, Raja Rao sets the trend of subverting the colonizer’s view of India.

Bhabani Bhattacharya’s *So Many Hungers* (1947) is set against the background of the Quit India Movement of 1942. It also depicts the Bengal famine in Calcutta and the impact of the Second World War on it. The writer tries to encompass the mercantile ethos and deterioration of moral standards to emphasize the common man’s miseries. The hunger for power and money correspond directly to the moral degradation of mankind. The personal and the national coalesce to give the novel a universal appeal.

R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) is an ironic interpretation of the impact of Gandhism on the freedom struggle. It also captures convincingly the latent savagery of those masquerading as Gandhians. Narayan depicts human predicament
and disillusionment in a realistic manner. He portrays the oppression of women in Indian homes and deterioration of moral values in a fast changing world in *The Guide* (1958).

The harsh economic realities in rural India found its eloquent expression in the novels of Kamala Markandaya. She brings forth some of the less savoury features of the professed Non-Violent Movement. *Nectar in the Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1955), and *A Handful of Rice* (1966) are some of the major works of Markandaya.

The painful events of the partition of India and its traumatic and bloody aftermath were powerful enough to trigger several creative instincts. The Indian English novelists who were under the magic spell of the Gandhian philosophy of non-violence were disenchanted by the post-partition holocaust. Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), Manohar Malgonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* (1964), and Chaman Nahal’s *Azadi* (1975) are some of the major works which highlight the deep wounds effectively.

*Train to Pakistan* captures the brutal story of political hatred and mass passions during the tragic days that preceded and followed the partition of India. Khushwant Singh exposes the innate pettiness of human beings who camouflage their sinister designs under righteous idealistic facades.
Malgonkar chronicles the sequence of events that led to the political subjugation and the traumatic experiences the country has gone through. He proves himself artistically successful in amalgamating the political ideology and emotional tension in his novels. He subjects the political ideologies and political events to critical scrutiny and portrays the effect they have on the quality of life of the people. *A Bend in the Ganges* is a political story which shifts from the foreign goods bonfire to the partition of the nation in 1947. *The Princes* (1963) is a political novel in the sense that the characters believe in their political ideology and try to live accordingly. The novelist merges the personal and the political and establishes a balanced relationship between the ideology and the experience. The artistic and ideological strains achieve a perfect cohesion in the novels of Malgonkar.

*Azadi* of Chaman Nahal focuses on the causes and consequences of the partition from the perspective of a Hindu family. His artistic pen strips off the layers of romance, valour and chivalry and lays bare certain historical realities.

These groups of novelists try to relate the political conduct of the masses to their personal predilections and depict the nation’s story through the life of their own protagonists. Their novels function as authentic national calendar of the contemporary time.
The post-Independence phase witnessed a brief soaring of hopes and excitement. Fissiparous forces soon appeared to mar the euphoria generated by the hard-won freedom. The sentimental glorification of nationalism was over and the national government was divested of its halo. It has also been characterized by a total eclipse of moral values and a gradual emergence of authoritarianism. The popular feeling of disillusionment was well-mirrored in the Indian English fiction of the time. A fresh crop of writers emerged who adopted diverse themes and styles of narration and a more confident approach to novel writing. They broke all conventional canons of fiction and implemented new fictional patterns which shocked the sensibility and imparted complexity to their treatment of politics. Moving away from descriptive writing and voicing aloud their inner thoughts, Indian English novelists gradually resorted to stylistic innovations and multiple perspectives. They experimented with new strategies of demystification since the romance with realism had already come to an end.

Multi-textuality, satire, paradox, irony, metafiction, magic realism etc. became the fashionable techniques and favourite tools of demystification. Their narrative strategies might be described as naturalistic, picaresque, parodic and non-linear. They combined history and fiction, and yoked myth and history together in an
unprecedented way, often questioning the adequacy of prevailing aesthetics of fiction. Magic realism became a pet technique among the modern political novelists. It is a form most expressive of the contemporary sensibility where marginalized and colonized cultures and consciousness may fracture the constructed reality in fabulous forms to express their own heightened sense of reality. There has been a consistent effort to abrogate and appropriate the English language in the novels of these political novelists. They introduced new lexicon, syntactic protocols, proverbs and idioms infused with a unique Indian flavour. In Gobinda Prasad Sarma’s opinion:

A study of the style of Indo-Anglian fiction reveals that even from the very beginning there has always been two main tendency—to write always chaste Standard English of impeccable idiom and rhythm of speech; and to write an English with translated idioms, occasional direct use of Indian words and Indian rhythms of speech in an attempt to capture the tempo of Indian life. (238-39)

Nayantara Sahgal projected the Indian socio-political scene in an intensely moral framework. Politics is all pervasive in the novels of Sahgal. Her novels show the impact of major political happenings on the lives of her characters. She gives a chronological account of Indian politics from the last phase of freedom struggle to the
breakdown of democracy during the period of Emergency in mid-seventies. A. V. Krishna Rao observes:

The fictional fabric of Nayantara Sahgal is not a romanticized view of modern India’s undeniably tumultuous political existence. Its artistic ambiguity has to be perceived in terms of the political ironies that prevail in New Delhi—a haven for political adventurists, unscrupulous and profligate politicians and their self-seeking supporters jostling with the just and the gentle. (28)

Political intrigue and the struggle for power depicted against the setting of New Delhi, render Sahgal’s novels fictional interpretation of the exclusive Indian situation. The uniqueness of Sahgal lies in her neutrality and her complete objectivity in the presentation of political issues and situations. She portrayed the shattered dreams of the idealistic politicians and the corruption of the lesser beings. *A Time to be Happy* (1958) depicts the life of upper middle class Indians, and covers a period of sixteen years from 1932-48. *This Time of Morning* (1965) is a clear cut and daring presentation of events in the protected world of politicians. It portrays the dilemma of a country passing through the birth pangs of evolution. *Storm in Chandigarh* (1969) traces the growth of coarse political culture percolating upwards from the states to the centre. *The Day in Shadow* (1971) gives a comprehensive picture of the political
scenario of the late sixties. Sahgal exposes the corrupt politicians who are motivated not by principles or convictions but by nauseating hypocrisies. *Rich Like Us* (1985) graphically paints the proclamation of Emergency and its brutalizing impact on the polity. The novel provides a glaring documentation of the silence of suspended animation that has descended on the nation during the Emergency time due to the crushing of individual rights in all fields of human activity.

There is always a prophetic nature in the perceptive political analysis in Sahgal’s works. She gazes at the politics of her time so minutely that even mere straws in the present air springs into view as tokens of typhoons in store. Sahgal’s novels present a fairly representative as well as an authentic example of the transmutation of political consciousness into art through the medium of imagination.

*Dusk before Dawn: A Novel of Post-Freedom India* (1978) by Anant Gopal Sheroray gives a painstaking portrayal of hopes gone wary. It is a scathing indictment delivered in forceful terms of the power politics of post-Independence India.

Some of the new generation novelists whose aesthetic sensibility is modulated by the contemporary socio-political scenario are; Anita Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Partap Sharma, Salman Rushdie, O. V. Vijayan, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Vikram Seth, Gita
Hariharn, Bharati Mukherjee etc. Multivalencies of structure, multiple perspectives and metafictive orientations would define the characteristics of this fresh crop of creative talents. They dared to adopt varied themes and styles of narration and had a unique concept of fictionalization. The literary ambience was enlivened by re-validation and restoration of the indigenous modes and by the Indianization of the English language. G. N. Devy observes:

The Indian writers in English have started enjoying telling stories . . . in one or other Indian registers of English, . . . they combine a great playfulness with a serious involvement in history. (112)

Anita Desai uses the partition of India as a symbol in her novel *Clear Light of Day* (1980). She artistically draws the picture of family relationships against the backdrop of the partition.

Partap Sharma provides an insight into the complexities of politics, religion and human relationships in his work *Days of the Turban* (1986). It presents a picture of India from inside. It exposes the vacuity of modern ideas and reiterates the validity of the traditional values. All popular ideas about the Punjab crisis and the diverse interpretations of these ideas are fictionalized in the novel.
Amitav Ghosh’s *The Shadow Lines* (1988) explores the historical as well as geographical re-shaping of the boundaries and also the inability of these boundaries to confine human emotions and memory. The narrative framework operates at several levels of time and history, of space and character, and of theme. Ghosh’s *The Circle of Reason* (1986) portrays social realism garbed in fantasy. His diasporic sensibility can be seen as encapsulated in an aesthetic mode interwoven with modernist and postmodernist narrative strategies.


The post-Independence Indian political situation especially the Emergency, proved to be a fertile ground for the artistic blooming of many literary talents. Modern political novelists responded properly to the grotesque and absurd situations created by desensitized and moronic politicians. This vibrant class of writers sought to put into
their transcendental kaleidoscope, the harrowing scenes of the Emergency and produced brilliant artistic patterns.

Salman Rushdie, O. V. Vijayan, and Shashi Tharoor belong to the new generation political novelists whose artistic sensibilities are ignited by the relentless craze for power exhibited by the semi-fascist regimes and their inevitable and disastrous consequences. These three novelists exhibit an undefiled Indian sensibility that speaks out through their professed commitment to expose the cancerous malaise that has affected the Indian political system. They share the same preoccupations and thoughts. They experimented with astounding stylistic deviations and fashioned a new aesthetics of demystification. Language became their primary target of attack. There was a complete deglamourization of the English tongue in their works. These three writers display an irreverent inventiveness in breaking all rules of the English language and create a register close to the vernacular Indian tongue. They have a perfect command over the language and smack of the same iconoclastic insouciance that is the trademark of postmodernism. A creative use of this kind of Indianized English effectively presented the socio-cultural context in which the Indian characters live and have their being. They refused to make any concession for the western readers and hence marked an altogether different phase in the Indian writer’s engagement with colonialist
discourse. Reflecting on the concern and predilections of the times, their novels are inventive explorations into the impact of power politics on the individual lives of the characters.

Salman Rushdie, O. V. Vijayan and Shashi Tharoor were successful in dealing with the emerging Indian political experience authentically and categorically, and their bold experimentation necessitated new definitions for the aesthetics of political fiction. Their fraternity had picked up raw materials from the existential problems engendered by the atrocities and anti-democratic ways of the ‘Indira Epoch’ which formed a dark chapter in modern Indian history.


The two most important political novels of Rushdie are Midnight’s Children and Shame, of which the former remains the most accoladed one. It fetched him the much coveted ‘Booker of Bookers’ prize in 1993. Makarand Paranjape’s comments on the importance of Midnight’s Children are relevant:

This momentous book (i.e., Midnight’s Children) really jolted the very foundation of the Indian-English novel. Its energy, its self-indulgence, irresponsibility, disorder, and cockiness really shocked the day lights out of the staid form of the Indian-English novel. (220)

The publication of Midnight’s Children provided the much required bombshell that shook the complacent attitude of Indian creative writers. Its stylistic innovations and use of fantasy as expressive device really stunned the tradition bound novelists in India. It is written in a comic-epic style, a form which is a fusion of Homeric, mythic and tragic connotations. The novel gives an ironic and authentic commentary of the major political events that took place in the twentieth-century India. It was a clarion call which heralded the postmodernism in Indian English writing.
Rushdie bestows a unique treatment to the political events of the subcontinent. He made astonishing experiments with language and style to capture the essence of the contemporary events. He owes his success partly to the plasticity of his language; its ability to sweep from the poetical to the mundane and its humorous and allegorical traits. Language in the hands of Rushdie is a very powerful strategy of demystification. *Midnight’s Children* compels comparison with Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. Márquez defamiliarizes the familiar and demystifies the supernatural. Rushdie shares some of the expressive modes of the great master in his portrayal of the human predicament.

While *Midnight’s Children* is a stupendous evocation of the political history of India since independence, *Shame* is about what happened in Pakistan after 1947. It is a comprehensive document of the contemporary political situation in Pakistan. Rushdie attempts to illuminate Pakistan’s hideous political realities in an extravagant satire. The novel offers a fantasized description of politics and transcends the confines of the particular and rises to the universal. It could be the story of any country where repressive forces are operating. He uses irreverent language which has both structural and thematic significance. Apart from projecting the grossness of power politics, Rushdie also aims at showing how shame has become a part of the ethos of the society in Pakistan:
Shameful things are done: lies, loose living, disrespect for one’s elders, failure to love one’s national flag, incorrect voting at elections, over-eating, extramarital sex, autobiographical novels, cheating at cards, maltreatment of womenfolk, examination failures, smuggling, throwing one’s wicket away at the crucial point of a Test Match: and they are done shamelessly. (S 122)

Rushdie’s Haroun and the Sea of Stories has been described as the continuing saga of his own life, which starts with Midnight’s Children. The controversial book The Satanic Verses cannot be categorized as a political novel but it offers a whole typology of postcolonial migrancy. While referring to the upheavals that succeeded the publication of The Satanic Verses by the Muslim fundamentalists, Michael Hanne views:

Since the instrumental political use of a work of literary fiction usually involves a narrow, even closed, reading of the text, it sometimes happens that the text opens out in ways which do not suit the interests of those who were seeking to appropriate its meaning to their sole use. (6)

The liberty Rushdie takes with the language does not prevent the discerning reader from perceiving his superior craftsmanship, his masterful satire and sparkling humour. Rushdie made a revolutionary departure from Standard English constructions and
implemented semantic neologisms which eventually resulted in the nativization of the language. Rushdie uses the hybrid language as a sharp weapon which punctures the bubbles of illusion of the political predicament of contemporary India.

O. V. Vijayan was an extraordinary writer with an enormous range of creativity. He was content to remain outside the awesome vastness of history when he wrote his first brilliant piece of fiction *Khasakkinte Ithihasam* (*The Legends of Khasak*) in 1969. It is characterized by a brooding sense of existential futility. This pioneering novel has brought about a sea change in Malayalam literature so much so that it marked a dividing line in the history of Malayalam fiction. During the seventies, Vijayan with his political commentaries and cartoons carved with brilliant sarcasm, emerged as one of the front-ranking critics of what came to be known as the ‘Indira Epoch’ in Indian politics. He artistically re-created his intolerance towards the Emergency period in India, most powerfully in the novel *The Saga of Dharmapuri* (1988). Originally it was written in Malayalam, later Vijayan himself had translated it into English. This exceptional political satire was the by-product of the direct personal response of the author to the dark days of the Emergency. With violent energy, Vijayan tears off the bogus facade of independence and democracy. He employs extreme form of excremental and erotic imagery to unleash a systematic assault on
the decaying concept of power. He justifies the nauseating use of scatology and obscenity when he says:

I was in search of the ultimate verbal obscenity because the objects of my criticism—the state, war, political and personal domination, the trivial motives beneath the grand historical postures of Kings and Presidents—were not merely scatological aberrations, but obscenity rooted in the spirit itself. (“The Sage” 94)

Scatology and vulgarity proves to be excellent strategic devices employed to expose the lacerating wounds of power politics. Vijayan skilfully employs shocking innovative techniques of demystification to convey the extreme political depravity of contemporary India.

The other major fictional works of Vijayan are; *Infinity of Grace* (1987), *Madhuram Gayathi* (1990), *The Path of the Prophet* (1992) and *Generations* (1997). *Infinity of Grace* has won the Kendra Sahitya Academy award. Vijayan’s best known collection of short stories is *After the Hanging and other Stories* (1989) in which he tracks down questions of ideology involved in the day-to-day business of living. *The Wart*, the much discussed short story belongs to this collection. It is a story reminiscent of Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915). The traumatic experience of the Emergency period forms the basic framework of this short story. Vijayan’s demented imagination brings out the tragic nexus between
authoritarianism and eroticism. The author gives the gross picture of a mole on the face of the narrator which grows bigger and bigger and develops into a repulsive and horrible tumour. Finally it becomes a cancerous ulcer having its own independent will. As the narrator becomes an obedient servant of the wart which fattens on his own flesh, he realizes the limit of his defencelessness against absolute power. The wart here stands as a symbol of dictatorship. The metaphor of body is central in his stories of power and politics. It is a neurotic world where the scatological, the erotic and the supernatural intermingle.

Shashi Tharoor is a prominent member in the vibrant group of writers called “Rushdie’s children” who revelled in celebrating the minority experiences through fragmentary narratives of the nation. Tharoor’s fiction essentially exhibited the Indian sensibility with utmost authenticity. He came out with his first fictional work The Great Indian Novel (1989) to shock the Indian literary scene with its stylistic experiments and biting satire about the post-Emergency Indian political situation. It is a veritable deconstruction of the master narrative of the nation, The Mahabharata. The novelist defamiliarizes contemporary political events by resorting to epic devices. The numberless characters in The Mahabharata are given new habitations and names in Tharoor’s novel. The battle of Kurukshetra becomes the battle against totalitarianism. Tharoor
judiciously superimposes a narrative of post-Independence national life over the basic tapestry of the epic, *The Mahabharata*. He gives a metafictional dimension to the novel by making it a commentary on the art of story telling also. Tharoor is here in the trail blazed by Rushdie working out a narratology for Indian polity and culture. The political history of modern India displayed by Tharoor resembles closely the events and the characters of the great epic.


*Show Business* parodies and satirizes the paradoxes in Bollywood film field. The story gets unfolded through the first person narration of the superstar protagonist Ashok Bangara. He gives summaries of his own movies which parallels events in his life. Tharoor’s gifted pen delineates a fine satire of the daily working in the field of show business. The novel was made into a film in 1994. *Riot* is a remarkable story about violence and hope. It is a tale of ignited passions wrapped in a heart felt treatise on complexities of Indian society. *The Five Dollar Smile and other Stories* is a collection of fourteen short stories. Apart from being a
talented Indian English novelist, he is a celebrated columnist as well. Tharoor’s satire is genteel and humane though it attacks the malpractices and misdeeds of the demented politicians.

This new generation of postcolonial writers imbibed and articulated the newly evolved interest in Indian classics and the fancy for employing Indian art forms before a cosmopolitan, global audience. They adopted new fictional techniques and modes with a view to change the paradigms of perception. Rushdie, Vijayan and Tharoor are writers of political parables which could be categorized under the title ‘political fiction’. They share an animated similarity among themselves and their works exhibit a merciless response to the post-Independence political situation in India. Covering almost the same period of Indian history, the three novels are tools in the hands of their authors by which they can make a passionate protest against the atrocities committed during the time of the Emergency. Conventional fictional techniques were discarded to make a bold and provocative statement about the ‘Indira Epoch’. New aesthetic strategies of demystification were employed by the three novelists to expose the ugly models of semi-fascist system which wore the false mask of liberalism.