Chapter 6

Conclusion

A political study of this kind unmasks the human relationships and identities as structured on power, not only the relationships that we habitually call political, like, for instance, the relationship between the State and the subject, but even those relationships that we generally regard as being beyond the pale/play of politics: between schools of philosophical thought which we assume to be disinterestedly pursuing "truth," in the rather ordinary human trait of laughter, or in the relationship between the genders. It is not only present in the postcolonial encounter between races but even in age-old institutions like caste which even the so-called progressive ideology like Marxism is unable to uproot and which in fact becomes deeply compromised by the very factor it tries to destabilise (The God of Small Things).

Quite interestingly, the prevalent discourse on these topics tries to use its analytical zeal not to uncover the politics but to gloss over it much in the same way a European monarch glossed over
his excesses, or, excused his excesses by appealing to the "divinity" of his kingly origin, camouflaging his earthly politics. So there is an ulterior motive behind this silence, a conspiracy to keep the status quo, which has to be interrogated and shown for what it is worth.

Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance starts out as a critique of the traditional dichotomy between romanticism and classicism, but which takes Phaedrus to the very doorsteps of time when the cornerstone of Western philosophical thinking is being laid. What he finds there is nothing short of a huge struggle to take possession of the Western mind between the Sophists and the followers of Parmenides who include philosophical heavyweights such as Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. In order to make Truth the object of future epistemological/ pedagogical pursuit, Socrates and his disciples are shown using the very rhetorical tools that they accuse the Sophists of. If Truth is what the camp of Socrates is trying to promote, the Sophists, whom they condemn, are promoters of the Good
and the Excellent, both conveyed by the Greek term *aretē*.

Contrary to the popular thinking that Truth and its pursuit had unproblematic appearance on the human scene, it is shown to be embroiled in politics, a project which Phaedrus undertakes and which bears remarkable similarity to the Nietzschean critique of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. The problematisation of Truth in *Zen* is internalised by the fictions of Rushdie and Ondaatje, which also contain narratives on the "construction" of Truth but in literary rather than philosophical terms. Rushdie's *Midnight Children* contests the "linearity" of official truth with the "circularity" of artistic truth or what Rushdie calls "memory's truth" (211). Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* has a more patently political objective of subverting the "propaganda" of official truth claims with the help of "interlinear" texts or subtexts which coexist with "mainstream" texts but which narrate an altogether different tale. The debate on such subversion is accompanied by parallel debates on "historical" and "scientific"
truths as an archaeologist and a forensic pathologist offer their own conflicting versions on it. The Foucauldian critique of Truth contained in his seminal essay titled "Truth and Power" has offered substantial theoretical support in reaching many of the conclusions in this chapter and I am especially indebted to Paul Rabinow's *The Foucault Reader* for conveniently accessing many of his valuable insights including the one which requires history to be viewed as struggle (56-61).

*Disgrace* looks at a historically charged moment (the transition of power from the whites to the blacks in South Africa) through the lens of race and gender politics. Written ostensibly in the spare, modernist style, it nevertheless chronicles an anti-humanist narrative in which shifting grids of power also effect a qualitative alteration in the racial relationships, completely reversing former equations. The canine imagery that runs through the novel and the master-slave association it evokes, complete the configurations of power. The dispossessed white and his conflictual relationship with the black are juxtaposed with the lot of the
Dalit, in *The God of Small Things*, as the politics of caste imprint on him the permanent stigma of untouchability and downtroddenness. The impotence of ideologies, when they are already implicated in caste politics, to bring about any change in his status, along with the pervasive affinities of caste that conspire to deny him an identity, is discussed. Caste is a construct that has become so powerfully inscribed within the Indian society, within the individual psyche, that it has acquired the force of a foundationalist concept, somewhat in the manner that gender became indissociably connected to sex. As a result race relations in South Africa and caste relations in India have become prone to hegemonic conflicts whose determination will largely depend on who do the determining. Patriarchy continues to rule the roost in both the fictions and the exercise of authority takes, interestingly, among other acts of male assertion, the form of frustration of the female sexual desire: Lucy's rape by a group of African men goes against the grain of her lesbian leanings and the lover of Ammu, Velutha, is
deliberately done to death by a group of caste-crazed policemen.

When it comes to maintaining its hegemony, the State, the most powerful of monoliths, is subject to the same excesses, prone to the same human rights violations, that it accuses the individual terrorist outfits of. In fact, it is capable of more vicious outrages as it is positioned to influence and manipulate public opinion, the discursive practices of a society, with the active collaboration of the mass media, particularly the powerful images churned out of its electronic networks. I acknowledge that this aspect of the politics of terror has hardly been dealt with and further work may pursue the way this politics gets legitimated through the manipulation of the media which in turn shapes the discourse on terror. It is important to remember that the politics of terror is not only let loose on terrorists or separatists, as in Anil's Ghost, but even on dissidents, especially dissidence that threatens to upset the apple cart of caste-structured hierarchies, as in The God of Small Things or power that masquerades as
ideological hygiene, as in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting.

The literary stereotypes of woman, as queen, mother, wife, lover or daughter have ranged from a self-sacrificing Desdemona to a scheming Lady Macbeth, but the attempt to plumb the political depths of man-woman relationship is of recent origin traceable to the feminist movements of the sixties. Kate Millett's publication of Sexual Politics (1970) is a literary landmark in this movement which inaugurates a much-needed sensitivity to the "interior colonisation" (25) by which patriarchy asserts its hegemony over the female (dis)order. Against such historical and theoretical background, Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride and Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and Laughable Loves fictionalise the gender war from perspectives guaranteed to generate further debate, using all the terminological and conceptual weaponry, problematising, for instance, the "male gaze" and sex role stereotyping. Since the politics of gender is so pervasive, restricted not only to the opposite gender but whose fallout is also felt
within the same gender, further study can be done on any fiction that centres conflicts and reconciliation of such conflicts of a decidedly sexual nature.

Laughter may appear to be the farthest removed from politics but postmodern laughter has politics written all over it. Contrary to the Jamesonian view that refuses to credit postmodern texts with any satirical or critical intent (17), in fictional practice Laughter is found to be not only a powerful tool which can critique the false seriousness of censorious authority (The Name of the Rose) but can also be a sceptical instrument capable of collapsing utopian metanarratives (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting). In The Fall the disembodied, derisive laughter makes the protagonist interrogate his life from a refreshed perspective, which again goes to show that laughter in the postmodern world need not be a hollow ring of empty noise devoid of content. As Linda Hutcheon says in The Politics of Postmodernism, "The prevailing interpretation is that postmodernism offers a value-free,
decorative, de-historicized quotation of past forms and that this is a most apt mode for a culture like our own that is oversaturated with images" (94). She problematises this notion of passive postmodernism by observing that it "may indeed be complicitous with the values it inscribes as well as subverts, but the subversion is still there" (106). And given the "evidence" of the three novels, one is persuaded to concur with her argument.

There is also an uncanny link between Truth and Laughter which has not, however, been explored adequately in this thesis but provides enough staple for further research. Jorge's aversion to laughter is directly attributable to his fear that it will open the floodgates of truth and by doing so will diminish the fear of the "simple" in divinity and divine retribution. Similarly William's espousal of the cause of laughter is grounded in his conviction that the fearlessness induced by laughter can make man more receptive to ideas. There is an unspoken correlation between fear and superstition on the one hand and laughter and
truth on the other. Besides, the heroes whom William valorises are Roger Bacon and William of Occam, two of the acknowledged intellectual giants of the time whose service to knowledge (read it as "truth") is indisputable. Aristotle's elevation of laughter is also based on his firm belief that it can provide an impetus to the discovery of truth, which makes Jorge consign the second volume of Poetics to flames as Aristotle still enjoyed a lot of intellectual esteem.

Similarly the contestation between the demonic and the angelic laughter in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting is a contest for the contrasting versions of "truth" with the uncritical Prelapsarians holding onto their version of the purity of Communist Paradise and the cynical laughter of the fallen dissidents disputing it. In The Fall too it is the mocking laughter heard everywhere that makes Clamence realise the "truth" of his existence and which forces him on his exile. "Politics of Laughter" aims to uncover to what end laughter is put to. As it is the postmodern laughter that the chapter is concerned with, it
tries to see if it is satirical or celebratory and concludes that the satirical content of postmodern laughter is greater than that of any other constituent component precisely because postmodernism is a child of the sceptical philosophy of Nietzsche and his later day adherents, Foucault and Lyotard. Consequently there is a heavy reliance on irony, which is showcased in all the three novels – The Name of the Rose, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Fall.

The Devil who laughs to convey a benumbing nihilism and the Angel who counter-laughs to register his protest in Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting, though a quaint comic image, precisely illustrate the politics latent in Laughter. It is not only that their laughter contains opposing perspectives but they are also a hegemonic kind of laughter, with each one evangelising that his own laughter is normative, and so closer to Truth. And just as Jorge uses his silences to intimidate his monks, in The Name of the Rose, William uses Laughter as a powerful
political tool to destabilise Jorge's position. The laughter that startles Clamence in The Fall is not just the laughter of the Absurd, as one would expect from Camus, but a political laughter that throws the dominant discourse of Clamence's time into disarray and calls into question his value preferences.

The circulation of power in Truth, State, Gender and Laughter and the various subterfuges it assumes have been the object of this study. The kind of knowledge-driven societies we have and the extraordinary premium attached to technologies and a corresponding downsizing of values such as excellence and goodness inscribed in areté are attributable to the successful political campaigns orchestrated by Socrates, Plato and Aristotle to promote the cause of Truth over everything else. Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance makes obvious this politics from which even schools of philosophy cannot escape. Midnight's Children and Anil's Ghost problematise the State's relationship with Truth and explore the instruments of protest available to the artist to
counter the hegemonic threat from the State. 
Whereas Disgrace describes an emergent State’s attempt to reorder a discourse, The God of Small Things narrates the preservation of an existing discourse to perpetuate its hegemony. The Robber Bride and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting show that power is neither male nor female but belongs to both. The Name of the Rose, The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and The Fall evaluate, each in its own way, the latent affinity of Laughter with power.

It is not my intention to argue that the fictional constructions of Truth, State, Gender and Laughter are more “real” than what conventional wisdom would allow. There may or may not be any correspondence between fictional constructions and their extratextual counterparts. But conventional wisdom has been busy hiding the political strings that it uses to align the perspectives of its societies and, fiction, safely banished beyond the margins of believability, might well be seeking, through indirection, directions.
Further research can be carried out on Truth, State, Gender and Laughter because it is the problem of manageability that restricted my consideration to two or three texts. As Truth becomes more and more the object of distortion and suppression not only by individuals but also by the State and as fiction begins to foreground this conflict, it can prove to be an interesting area for further exploration. With postcolonialism in the theoretical forefront among the erstwhile colonies of the imperial powers and with the colonies themselves displaying greater and greater sensitivity to their various forms of subjugation, politics is well on the centre stage of cultural productions, critical as well as creative.