Abstract

Two writers from the Indian sub-continent, three from Europe, one from the Republic of South Africa, one from the USA and two from Canada may bespeak geographical and cultural diversity of an extreme sort. What gives unity, or, at least, a measure of correspondence, to writings of such diversity are the discernible configurations of power which are seen to be active in constructs as varied as Truth, State, Gender and Laughter. The choice of these constructs is not as random as it appears at first glance. It is dictated, on the contrary, by the very agenda of this dissertation, which is to show the presence of politics even in constructs apparently unreachable by its contaminating presence. In fact, it seeks to erase the distinction between the personal and the political by foregrounding the operation of power in both these realms. The texts chosen for study are: Albert Camus's *The Fall* (1963), Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974), Milan Kundera's *Laughable Loves* (1975) and *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* (1983), Salman

1. Introduction

Using Nietzschean and Foucauldian philosophical footholds, and borrowing liberally from Linda Hutcheon’s brave defence of postmodernism, an attempt has been made to provide a perspective on the ubiquitous presence of power and its politics in constructs as wide ranging as Truth, State, Gender and Laughter. Though these constructs are apparently as devoid of an organizing principle as the postmodern itself, they are expected to occupy two broadly recognizable, if not exactly divisible, slots: the political and the personal. Such slotting is done not with the intention of keeping the political and the personal apart but to show how interconnected they are, and how tenuous the boundaries that separate them. This inmixing of constructs which tradition has kept
apart also enables one to see the pervasive politics and power play inherent in them which in turn invites an interrogation of the tradition itself, which perpetuates certain varieties of hegemonies to preserve the status quo. By calling them “constructs” an anti-foundationalist stance is maintained leaving them open to interrogation and scrutiny. There is also a complementarity among them, especially between Truth and State and also between Truth and Laughter. The State’s prerogative in determining what passes for Truth and the way it awards legitimacy or withholds sanction to a discourse bring Truth and the State together, strange bedfellows they may be. Laughter, likewise, disguises the normative hegemony it wants to wield by laying claim to, none other than, Truth.

2. The Narratives of Truth

“The Narratives of Truth” discusses three works whose focal point is truth. Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* problematises the notion of the pursuit of Truth as endemic to mankind, an epistemological and
pedagogical “given.” On the contrary it starts only with Parmenides, a philosopher who lived in the fourth century BC and his more famous disciple, Socrates. On the way to establishing its primacy Truth had to battle against aretē, a Greek word that combines the meaning of “excellence” and “goodness,” a totality of living as against the modern concept of specialisation. The campaign of vilification unleashed by Socrates and his followers against the Sophists (who held Truth to be relative) makes sense only when it is viewed in such conflictual terms. In this problematisation there are found to be many surprising parallels between Phaedrus, the protagonist of Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance and Nietzsche as what both propose is nothing short of an alternative way of life, a way of life in which greater premium is placed not so much on Truth as on excellence and goodness, a shift of emphasis which “qualitatively” alters every aspect of life. The “arrival”, of Truth on the human scene and the rapidity with which it transformed itself as an object of pursuit make it a powerful locus of power.
If *Zen* problematises Truth in philosophical terms, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* do it in fictional terms. *Midnight's Children* contests the linear Truth of the State with the circular Truth of the Artist who overcomes regimes of censorship to present his counter-version. He does so with the help of many rhetorical devices but prominent among them is the elevation of the trivial to subvert the grand, the strategic importance given to silver spittoons, chutneys, pickles and pepper pots and the downsizing of the State and its real-life leaders. Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost* too provides two versions of Truth, but this time it is the Truth of the objective sciences versus the "archaeological" Truth of the past as Anil and Sarath, a forensic scientist and an archaeologist respectively, present their own conflicting versions. Palipana, an aged epigraphist and teacher of Sarath, finds, from the shallowly chiselled "interlinear" inscriptions narrating an altogether different version of the tale, that Truth has always been an object of suppression and distortion by the State. Whether as an object of a prolonged
philosophical struggle or as a zealously guarded State secret, Truth has consistently been a site of fierce contests and therefore a site of power.

3. Constructing the State

3.1. The Terror of Power

The way fiction has constructed the State primarily as a conglomeration of power forms the staple of this chapter, which is divided into two parts. J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* and Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* show the way the State is able to perpetuate its hegemony with the help of discursive practices. *Disgrace* locates, and is located by, a momentous period in history when the reins of power shift from the whites to the blacks of South Africa finally bringing to an end an inglorious chapter of misrule and inhumanity. With the shift in power there is a subtle shift in the political discourse and also in the metaphors of oppression. Amusingly, and no less ironically, it is the white who is forced to seek refuge in such metaphors which are till now used to describe the "condition" of the black. What the novel chronicles
Is simply a reversal of injustice and not, as many foresaw, a restoration of justice.

The way the emergent State reshapes and reformulates power and the corresponding transfiguration of discourse are the prominent topics of discussion. If Disgrace shows a racially divided society coming to terms under changed circumstances, Roy's The God of Small Things describes the successful retention of power by the uppercastes in a society fractured along lines of caste. Drawing parallels between the blacks of South Africa and the Dalits of India, this chapter shows how untenable such a comparison has become because it is the white that calls himself "harijan" now in a significant reversal of fortunes. The impotence of ideologies, when they are already implicated in caste politics, to bring about any amelioration in the Dalit's status, along with the pervasive affinities of caste that conspire to deny him an identity, is discussed. The construct of caste 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. Consequently, 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 novels 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.

3.2. The Power of Terror

If the first part of this chapter is concerned with the way the State exercises power through subtle manipulation of discourses, the second part narrates the abandonment of subtlety and a preference for naked assertion of power. It shows the State with all its claws and fangs bared, an awesome display of power to continue the status quo and preserve its hegemony. Michael Ondaatje's
Anil's Ghost, Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and again Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things form the clutch of novels in "The Power of Terror." If these diverse novels have one thing in common, it is the terrorism of the State unleashed for a variety of reasons: in Anil's Ghost the State lets loose terror ostensibly to combat terrorism and separatism but eventually reaches a stage when it becomes practically indistinguishable from the adversary it set out to eliminate.

If ethnicity is the bone of contention in Anil's Ghost, caste and ideology determine the use of this ultimate weapon in The God of Small Things and The Book of Laughter and Forgetting respectively. The dark side of the State, which these novels bring to light, shows it to be a locus of deterrent power unalterably changing the very conception of the State as a benign guardian of the weak and an impartial administrator of justice.

4. Gender Wars

"Gender Wars" marks the transition from the political to the personal without, however, relinquishing the notion that the personal is also
political. Margaret Atwood’s *The Robber Bride* and Milan Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and *Laughable Loves* locate the gender as a site of power but this location is done from the polemical masculine and feminine perspectives. Atwood’s novel interrogates the familiar stereotype of woman as victim and shows her, instead, as possessing all the predatory hunger and destructive aggression that the male is usually accused of. The way Zenia values “fear” over all other feelings not only gives a peep into her character but it is a pointer that personal relations are not above or beyond equations of power.

Kundera’s *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* and his short fiction *Laughable Loves* effect a similar erasure of the boundaries between the personal and the political showing that even the most intimate of relationships have power factored into them.

5. Politics of Laughter

*The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* won much critical kudos for its author for the successful erasure of boundaries between the personal and
the political. Laughter, which is usually assumed to belong to the personal, deftly gets elevated to the philosophical level contemplating questions of meaning and meaninglessness, happiness and freedom in a Communist paradise contested by the scepticism of its opponents.

This deconstruction of laughter is in the other two pre-eminent novels of recent time too: Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose*, and Albert Camus’s *The Fall*. The questions of Christ’s laughter and His poverty were two of the hotly debated issues in the medieval world of Italy, which provides Eco with the necessary ammunition to launch his own critique of laughter. He establishes an uncanny link between truth and laughter by dramatizing the contest between William, the Franciscan friar who valorises laughter, and Jorge, who hates the very sound of it. 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 or 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. 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.

As early as in 1963 Albert Camus’s The Fall understood the power of laughter, which deconstructs the life and times of Jean-Baptiste Clamence exposing the collective sham in which not only Clamence but the whole of Eurocentric civilisation is implicated. Two of the most significant events to happen in the life of Jean-Baptiste Clamence are the suicide of the girl jumping into the Seine and her cries for help which go unheeded by Clamence. What follows is the mysterious and mocking laughter that Clamence begins hearing everywhere that makes him realise the “truth” of his existence and which forces him
on his exile. The satirical innuendo of this laughter is markedly different in character from that of the other novels but it certainly has enough power to force the protagonist launch a critique of himself and his time preparatory to arriving at an enlightened self-awareness.

The chapter "Politics of Laughter" enquires whether postmodern laughter is satirical or celebratory and probes the extent of its affinity with the Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter. It concludes that in fictional practice laughter is not only a powerful tool which can critique the false seriousness of censorious authority (The Name of the Rose) but is also a sceptical instrument capable of collapsing utopian metanarratives (The Book of Laughter and Forgetting). In The Fall, the mocking laughter the protagonist hears (and dreads) enables him to look at his life and times from a refreshed perspective. Contrary to Frederic Jameson's refusal to posit any critical or satirical intent to the postmodern works, these three novels carry on a stringent critique of dogmatic faiths (The Name of the Rose), dictatorial ideologies that
leave no room for scepticism (_The Book of Laughter and Forgetting_) and a society that spawns hollow men like Jean-Baptiste Clamence (_The Fall_). Since laughter is instrumental in change, it is conceived as a site of power and hence prone to politics.

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' ("The Narratives of Truth"), in the rather ordinary human trait of laughter ("Politics of Laughter"), or in the relationship between the genders ("Gender Wars"). 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 supplant ("Constructing the State").

In its study of Truth, State, Gender and
Laughter this thesis is indebted to theoretical
premises that can be traced to Nietzsche, Foucault
and Lyotard. Nietzsche's attribution of all struggles
and functions of man to "will to power" and
Foucault's refinement of the role of power as being
not only oppressive but also productive, and
Lyotard's final equation of Truth to Power
especially in a world increasingly driven by the
corporate sector have provided the necessary
theoretical foundation for the construction of this
thesis.