Chapter 1

Introduction

The circulation of power is an inalienable factor in conferring and denying identities, in making certain discourses accepted and certain others discredited and in legitimising specific ideologies and debarring certain others. This is far from asserting that power is the only exclusive factor responsible for the sanction and denial of identities. Rather, it is to give the importance due to it as a factor in determining the grid of human relationships. Though power is conceded to be a key concept in public spheres such as politics or bureaucracy, judiciary or defence, there is a tacit assumption that it has very little to do in private affairs. This thesis proposes to problematise this assumption and to demonstrate that power is an animating principle, a driving force, in public and private spheres of life.

Wherever power is the operative concept determining the network of human relationships, conferring and denying identities, irrespective of whether it is done in the personal or political
sphere, the term "politics" shall be used. This is not an attempt to conflate disparate concepts but a ploy to foreground those areas of domesticity and privacy which escaped interrogation hidden under the veil of false sanctities imposed to perpetuate covert hegemony, discrimination and marginalisation. As will be seen later the private games of power play are in fact micronarratives of the great games of politics, the rules of play remaining surprisingly similar. As Kundera says in *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting*: "The metaphysics of man is the same in the private sphere as in the public one" (234).

Nietzsche, Foucault and Lyotard have dealt with the concept of power and the various methodologies by which it inscribes itself in human affairs. The Nietzschean philosophy is so dominated by his "will to power" that he sees almost every human activity conditioned by it:

Granted finally that one succeeded in explaining our entire instinctual life as the development and ramification of one basic form of will -- as will to power, as
Is my theory --; granted that one could trace all organic functions back to this will to power and could also find in it the solution to the problem of procreation and nourishment -- they are one problem -- one would have acquired the right to define all efficient force unequivocally as: will to power. (Reader 229)

But it was Foucault who carried the refinement further by thinking beyond the purely prescriptive conception of power by implicating it not only in acts of disciplining and punishing but also in rewarding and satisfying:

In defining the effects of power as repression, one adopts a purely juridical conception of such power; one identifies power with a law which says no; power is taken above all as carrying the force of prohibition. Now I believe that this is a wholly negative, narrow, skeletal conception of power, one which has been curiously widespread.
If power were never anything but repressive, if it never did anything but to say no, do you really think one would be brought to obey it? What makes power hold good, what makes it accepted, is simply the fact that it doesn’t only weigh on us as a force that says no, but that it traverses and produces things, it induces pleasure, forms knowledge, produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than as negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 61)

In the Lyotardian postmodern multiverse power gets equated, finally, with the pursuit of truth:

The production of proof, which is in principle only part of an argumentation process designed to win agreement from the addressees of scientific messages, thus falls under the control of another language game, in which the goal is no
longer truth, but performativity -- that is, the best possible input/output equation. The State and/or company must abandon the idealist and humanist narratives of legitimation in order to justify the new goal: in the discourse of today's financial backers of research, the only credible goal is power. Scientists, technicians, and instruments are purchased not to find truth, but to augment power. (46)

The Nietzschean concept of "will to power" and the Foucauldian concept of power as the privileged instrument in the production of discourses and the Lyotardian notion of power as the exclusive concern of the State-turned-corporate world of profit and gains have all been used to deconstruct the structure of power in the fictions of select authors.

Such a power-centric approach will necessarily be postmodern as it is based on the anti-essentialist premise that identities of individuals
and groups and also ideologies are "constructs" out of contingent needs, or, to be more specific, needs prompted by power. David Gauntlett, discussing the flexibility of the Foucauldian concept of power in the construction of identities, says, in an article on the Web:

One of the key things to remember when trying to understand Foucault's ideas about power [. . .] is what that model is in opposition to. Old models of power [. . .] would always tend to argue that power was held exclusively by dominant groups in society[. . .]. Foucauldian work runs against all this, suggesting, instead, 

*power is something which can be used and deployed by particular people in specific situations, which itself will produce other reactions and resistances; and isn't tied to specific groups or identities.* (Emphasis added)

Power becomes heterogeneous, dispersed and continuous in such a model and so comes closest to
resembling the dynamics of reality unlike in other models, which squeeze power into theoretical straitjackets.

There are two strands of thinking when it comes to describing the problematic relationship of postmodernism to politics. One could subscribe to the Jamesonian theory which makes postmodernism fully complicitous with "late capitalism":

What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally [. . .]. I must remind the reader [. . .] that this whole global, yet American, postmodern culture is the internal and superstructural expression of a whole new wave of American military and economic domination [. . .]. (Cultural Logic 6)

The other way of thinking, as articulated by Linda Hutcheon in her The Politics of Postmodernism, is to accept that postmodernism is implicated in capitalist practices but at the same time assert
that it is critical of and subversive to such practices: "[Postmodern] parody is doubly coded in political terms: it both legitimizes and subverts that which it parodies" (101). Hutcheon departs from the Jamesonian view by underscoring the ways in which postmodern cultural works engage in effective political critiques of the postmodern world around us: "Critique is as important as complicity in the response of cultural postmodernism to the philosophical and socio-economic realities of postmodernity: postmodernism here is not so much what Jameson sees as a systemic form of capitalism as the name given to cultural practices which acknowledge their inevitable implication in capitalism, *without relinquishing the power or will to intervene critically in it*" (27)(Emphasis added). This thesis inclines more towards the conceptualisation of Hutcheon than that of Jameson because it believes, on the strength of the evidence found in these novels, in the capacity of postmodern cultural works to engage in effective political critiques.
The five clusters of novels under the seemingly arbitrary rubrics of Truth, State, Gender and Laughter demonstrate, hopefully, power at play in a variety of human endeavours, personal as well as public. The rationale behind the choice of these subjects and what implication the deconstructions of these subjects pose may be considered now.

Introducing Nietzsche to readers, Cahoone calls him "the grandfather of postmodernism" for his "radical critique of metaphysics, the unity of the self, even of truth itself" (102). Nietzsche's quarrel is not so much with truth as with the absolutist version of truth, which philosophers before him considered to be their sole concern. Nietzsche contests this by relativising and historicizing truth, and by making it a periodising concept, as much subject to change as anything else. The want of historicisation, the refusal to situate truth within the paradigm of history is dubbed by him as "the family failing of all philosophers" (Reader 29). When his mad man declares in an ecstasy of clairvoyance, "God is dead" (Gay Science 6) he is not declaring the death of an entity but the demise
of transcendental truth. If foregrounding history in his task of examining truth is one of his favourite strategies, the other, related one, is acknowledging the perspectival character of truth, which makes him declare in a seemingly outrageous fashion, "There are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths" (Reader 29). Anticipating Derridean textual extremism Nietzsche even points out the linguistic dimension to truth when he says:

Man has for long ages believed in the concepts and names of things as in aeternate veritates [...]. He really thought that in language he possessed knowledge of the world. (qtd. in Hollingdale 133)

The sceptical glance that postmodernism casts over entrenched beliefs and systems, its commitment to problematisation, owes a good deal to Nietzschean philosophy.

Pursuing the Nietzschean project of problematising truth, Foucault underlines the
kinship of truth with power besides pointing out its "political" character:

The important thing here, I believe, is that truth isn't outside power, or lacking in power: contrary to a myth whose history and functions would repay further study, truth isn't the reward of free spirits, the child of protracted solitude, nor the privilege of those who have succeeded in liberating themselves. Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of restraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in the acquisition of truth; the status of those
who are charged with saying what counts as true. ("Truth and Power" 379)

He also proposes in the same essay an agenda for those who wish to rescue truth from the socio-cultural hegemony within which it operates:

It is not a matter of emancipating truth from every system of power (which would be a chimera, for truth is already power) but of detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic and cultural, within which it operates at the present time. (381)

The Nietzschean and Foucauldian concepts problematise the transcendental notions of truth by calling attention to its historicity, perspectivism, linguistics and politics in which it is enmeshed. The three texts that come under the purview of this chapter are Pirsig’s Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance (1974), Rushdie’s Midnight Children (1983) and Ondaatje’s Anil’s Ghost (2001), as they all share this preoccupation with the
problematisation of truth. *Zen* (*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*) locates the notion and pursuit of truth within the Western philosophic tradition, while the other two concern themselves with the postmodern appropriation of this legacy. *Zen* talks of battles in which the victor stands to gain the most powerful of trophies, truth itself. It talks of battles that span across centuries and are even now fought in classrooms everywhere, a battle initiated by Parmenides in fourth century BC but whose impact, multiplied many times by the Enlightenment, is felt to the present day. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* contests the truth of the State with the truth of artistic construction or what Rushdie calls “memory’s truth” (211) while *Anil’s Ghost* by Michael Ondaatje pits the truth of the objective sciences against the historical truth of the past.

*Anil’s Ghost* and *Midnight’s Children*, besides constructing conflicting versions of truth, also narrate the dark role of the State in ultimately determining what is true and what lies outside its boundaries. And unless the artist, braving all odds,
comes out with the suppressed version of truth, the truth lies buried to all eternity. The point is what constitutes truth and how the State is constituted are not only closely related questions but questions that point out the "politicity" of truth. Since the construction and structure of the State (the how of the State) has a direct bearing on the notions of truth, it becomes a matter of paramount importance to see how the State administers clever doses of persuasion and coercion in order to further its own interests, which, in almost every instance, happens to coincide with the interests of the governing classes.

"The Terror of Power" brings two culturally, socially and racially separate novels together under one umbrella, without, it is hoped, doing violence to their "otherness." Disgrace (1999) by J.M. Coetzee and The God of Small Things (1997) by Arundhati Roy concern themselves with the dispossession of political power, which allows them to be treated on "the same footing." There are many points of similarity between the blacks of South Africa and the Dalits of India, the most
important of which is the long history of suppression both have endured. If the dreaded apartheid forced the blacks to live in ghettos in their own homelands, the infamous untouchability kept the Dalits on the fringes of society. But there is one vital difference: whereas the blacks of South Africa have managed to oust the whites from the seats of governance, the Dalits of India continue to be objects of victimisation and marginalisation. *Disgrace*, written from the minority white viewpoint, chronicles this transfer of power despairingly, and *The God of Small Things*, sympathetic to the interests of the Dalits, also ends in a note of despair as the upper castes manage to contain (yet again) the Dalits’ aspiration for power. Even as the two novels by the Booker-winning authors trace the loops of power as it passes through the configurations of race and caste, various other subtexts of gender politics also get written whose unavoidable victims turn out to be, unsurprisingly, women. Besides, it also brings home the fact that the change in the reins of power has not resulted in the ushering in of “justice”. On
the contrary, atrocities continue to be perpetrated but this time the victims happen to be the whites, who had till now enjoyed undisputed political power. Though this can be explained away as the travails of a society in transition, it does very little to alter the "reality" as constructed in the novel. A great many personal lives are affected in these two novels but this chapter concerns itself with the public space that we term as "politics" and there is an unquestionable subordination of individuals to the repressive State apparatuses. It might also be noticed that there is very little rebellion in either of these novels perhaps because rebellion is ruled out in the majoritarian politics of sheer number.

From the terror of political power it is easy enough to make the transition to the power of terror which again deals with State power but this time in its extreme manifestation: it does not merely aim at coercion but plays the more dangerous game of elimination.

Without doubt terrorism is the most violent, open assertion of power by the disempowered
groups. Even in its most virulent forms, even as it displays its absolute power over terrified people, it seems to be acknowledging, in a clandestine manner, its impoverished status. This makes terrorism Janus-faced, inscribing the contradictory binary of power/powerlessness with "aporia" or undecidability at the heart of terrorism, though the decisive way in which these acts are carried out may negate such a notion. After the September 11 attack on the WTC and the subsequent media coverage nobody can deny that terrorism has become a spectacle and a media event in the same way the Gulf War in 1991 became a media war in the Baudrillardian fashion (qtd. in Barry 89). This is not to deny the reality of the event. It is to point out the politics of "packaging" an event not only in order to sensationalise it but also to "sell" it. Just as a news coverage or an advertisement deems itself effective when it has reached millions of people, a terrorist strike seems to count on being a high-profile mega-event capable of instantly reaching millions of homes through the electronic network.
Terrorism is what terrorism does. Its aim is to terrorize people and reduce them to the status of mere pawns in a huge political game that may be played out elsewhere. By doing so, the terrorist seems to act out the game of powerlessness on his hapless victims, a powerlessness that the terrorist himself feels. It is accepted that terrorism is ultimately a nullifying, nihilistic act and in its scepticism of values it may appear to possess a (spurious) relationship with the postmodern itself even while carrying out such modernist agenda as nationhood or purity of this or that holy text (Irvine).

Though such are the theory and praxis of individual terrorist outfits, the agenda gets modified when the State itself launches unlawful, counter-terrorist operations whose ostensible aim is to defeat the terrorist at his own game by appropriating the same tactics. This introduces the reader to a new phase of terrorism and brings him face-to-face with such concepts as "ethnic-cleansing" which is only a euphemism for State-sponsored mass murders aimed at eliminating the
minorities and other marginalized and disadvantaged groups. Since the State can count on the support, or at least the silence, of the majority, it can carry out its agenda of annihilation under the guise of "anti-insurgency" operations with complete immunity.

When the State resorts to what Ondaatje calls "extrajudicial killings" (17), it is an implied admission on its part of the breakdown of the law and order machinery, which, coming under the purview of the judiciary, cannot act independently. So the task is entrusted to quasi-government agencies whose identities are kept secret or the task is "leased out" or "outsourced" to criminal gangs whose affiliation to the government cannot be traced as the "deniability" factor is what matters most. It is the State-sponsored terrorism that brings the three novels, Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost, Arundhati Roy's The God of Small Things and Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting (1983) under one rubric though the reasons for its deployment differ as ethnicity, caste and ideology
play out their gruesome little games respectively in the three novels.

The phraseology of "The Power of Terror" is subject to ambiguities: it can be taken to mean terror used to attain political objectives whereas an attempt has been made to foreground not only the methodology of terror but also its ideology, its causative factors and what it seeks to further and whose interests it seeks to protect. The basic assumption is that identities are forged and identities are erased on grounds of power and since power, as Foucault once said about truth, is "a thing of this world" ("Truth and Power" 379), the identities themselves are things of this world, constructs for the furtherance and realization of specific objectives.

Passing from the political to the personal, "Gender Wars" explores the dynamics of the relationship between the genders and concludes that the fictional construction of the genders, from the male as well as the female perspective, has as much of power factored into it as the most political
of relationships. This is expected to set out the premise listed at the outset, namely, power equations inhere in personal and political realms. “Gender Wars” must conjure up association with Kate Millett’s Sexual Politics (1970), written from an avowedly feminist viewpoint and which did a “power” of good in focusing attention on neglected women’s issue. But as late as in 2004, when such issues are accepted without contest even though their realisation in full measure is still to come, there is a need to study the politics involved in the relationship not only between genders but also within the same gender. What becomes evident in such a study is that power is an aphrodisiac even in matters related to sex, something that is marginalized and glossed over when sex is valorised as love, and something that is present even in the passionate plea of Andrew Marvell’s lover to his coy mistress (Guerin et al. 215-17). So a sort of ideological debate, or, in postmodern terms, an intertextual debate is planned between the fictions of Margaret Atwood and Milan Kundera whose polemical representation is assumed to
address the issue of power in sexual relationships including the courtship behaviour with which they are usually prefaced.

Role-playing or sex role stereotyping with the help of which the partners seek to advantageously position themselves in their mutual relationship is also addressed. The much-pilloried "male gaze," which, like a taxidermist's nail, fixes a woman before turning her into an object and the way this gaze is returned by the female who redeems herself from this objectifying position are also interrogated. This chapter also interrogates the easy assumption that with the empowerment of women all politics between the genders will come to a close and a sort of truce, if not equality, shall prevail. This myth is exploded as the female protagonist of The Robber Bride (1993) simply ploughs down not only the men but also the women standing in her way. The novels forming this cluster are Margaret Atwood's The Robber Bride and Milan Kundera's The Book of Laughter and Forgetting and his short fiction Laughable Loves (1975).
With the sound of laughter still echoing from the last of the two novels mentioned, laughter, indeed, becomes the focal point in the chapter titled "Politics of Laughter" and this is done for a variety of reasons. When play, irony and parody are said to form the postmodern configuration as opposed to the modernist "purpose" (Woods 60), one can expect postmodernism to gaily clothe itself in "laughter." Again, in contradistinction to modernism's nostalgic lamentation of the past, postmodernism is supposed to embrace the fragmentation of the present with euphoric laughter and given the need for postmodernism to pit itself against some of the features of modernism, a measure of politics is bound to be there. There is also the Bakhtinian carnivalesque laughter resonating in *Rabelais and His World* and what with its celebration of the body and the mingling of the high and low (Bakhtin 19-20), it shares (some) common ground with its postmodern counterpart.

Laughter can be celebratory or derisive, or, to put it in Kundera's terms, "angelic or diabolic"
(Book 61). The derisive, ironic laughter of the devil, whose intention is to disparage and destroy, and which confers power to the laugher, is certainly political in its emission. And even the celebratory laughter of the common folk can get politicised as in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, simply because Jorge, the blind villain, cannot discriminate between the two types of laughter, and to him all laughter is "diabolical" (475). In *The Name of the Rose*, the Bakhtinian laughter of the "simple" valorised by the Franciscans as "a vehicle of wisdom" (478) commingles with the ironizing laughter of William, which mocks at the modernist "seriousness" of Jorge of Burgos. Jorge's complaint against laughter is the way it destroys "fear" (475), especially the fear of divine retribution, and thereby diminishes his own importance. It propels him to become the self-appointed agent of God but blocking his way is not only William but also Aristotle's second volume of *Poetics*, which is supposed to have valorised laughter as an instrument for the discovery of truth and the publication of which is certainly against the
interests of Jorge, who consigns it to the flames. The novel gains much of its resonance through the way it politicises laughter by making it coexist with the utmost fear of laughter.

The Book of Laughter and Forgetting by Milan Kundera deconstructs laughter into two kinds, though traditionally both go by the same name: angelic and diabolic laughter, which communicate two different poles of meaning, namely meaning and meaninglessness. The angelic laughter is celebratory and the diabolic laughter is sceptical, derisive. Into this deconstruction, Kundera also threads a critique of totalitarian politics and there is a constant oscillation between the personal and the political, one drawing lessons from the other.

The Fall by Albert Camus takes the metanarrative of "Self" and shows it to be constructed, in piecemeal fashion, of various mosaics of "selves," lacking a centre, or organising principle, finally attaining a dubious "self-awareness" which dissolves into nothing. In the midst of the monologue of this self-confessing Paris
lawyer, a derisive and recurrent laughter is heard, mocking all that he "stands for" and his life becomes one endless attempt to flee it.

Though all the three novels centralise laughter, the connotation of laughter differs in each novel: it can be celebratory, sceptical or derisive. No attempt has been made to subsume one category into the other. However, one unifying factor seems to run through all the three novels and that is the way laughter depends on the concept of truth for completion of its "meaning." In Umberto Eco's The Name of the Rose William eulogises laughter, especially the Aristotelian laughter, because it can be a means to the discovery of truth and Jorge fears it as it will diminish the fear of "the simple" (the common folk) in divine wrath. There is a tacit correspondence between laughter and truth on the one hand, fear and ignorance on the other. The diabolical and angelic laughter in The Book of Laughter and Forgetting contest "truth" with believers in Communist Paradise vociferously asserting the purity of their dreams and the cynical laughter of their expelled comrades disputing it.
Similarly, in Camus’s *The Fall*, the mocking laughter that Clamence hears everywhere makes him realise the “truth” of his existence leading him on to his voluntary exile. This interdependence or complementarity between the concept of truth and the concept of laughter provides the necessary link between concepts that are apparently unlike.

One of the crucial “moves” of postmodernism against the metanarratives of modernism is its “anti-totalising” drive. This anti-totalisation exhibits itself, as Lyotard says, “as incredulity towards metanarratives” (xxiv). Elaborating on what this entails, he adds: “Postmodern knowledge is not simply a tool of the authorities; it refines our sensitivity to differences and reinforces our ability to tolerate the incommensurable” (xxv) (Emphasis added). Keeping this need to recognise “differences” no attempt has been made to forcibly yoke socially, culturally disparate fictions into an overarching schema, as it will certainly injure the “otherness” that each novel celebrates. This should account for the methodology of this thesis, which, hopefully, does justice to the distinctness of each
novel instead of attempting any "globalising spread." Secondly, the easy trafficking of a novel from one rubric to the other is expected to serve as a reminder that one version of it can coexist with another. For instance, *The Book of Laughter and Forgetting* occupies multiple slots, as does Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things*. 