Chapter 2

The Narratives of Truth

We looked at the world around us as a snapshot when it was really a movie, constantly changing. Of course we knew it was changing but we behaved as if it wasn't. We denied the reality of change. (Crichton 325)

Ever since Nietzsche broke the absolutist claims of truth with a startling counter-claim that all truths are "interpretations" made according to the dictates of human needs (Reader 69), he has brought about a salutary change in the human sciences. The change has not only meant more freedom to invent and interpret but it has also helped to see through the film of objectivity covering crass lies and base propaganda of "official" truth-claims. One of the beneficiaries of this problematisation of truth is literature, fiction in particular, because, by guaranteeing the plurality of truth, and by making even philosophical truths contingent on the
language in which they are written, it has given a measure of respectability to a field that has been scorned as a figment of imagination and, so, insubstantial.

Postmodern fiction feels much indebted to this interrogation; it feels, in fact, it owes its very existence to it. Lyotard's famous definition of the postmodern condition "as incredulity toward metanarratives" (xxiv) can be paraphrased as scepticism toward any absolutist/totalising truth-claims and this is mirrored in most postmodern fictions as a genetic/generic characteristic of its mode of production. What such fictions do, though each in its own way, is to contest the tall claims of infallibility made by the wielders and holders of power either by presenting their own counter-version (Midnight's Children), or, through a rigorous process of archaeological detection, arrive at a version quite contrary to the currently-held beliefs/belief systems (Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance), or, point out that what passes for truth and its "other" have coexisted,
though uncomfortably and fugitively, from historical times (*Anil's Ghost*).

He being a neo-Nietzschean himself, Foucault has added a new dimension to this project of problematisation of truth through a relentless and rigorous process of historicisation. According to him, history is "intelligible and susceptible to analysis down to the smallest detail" (Foucault 56) if the search is rigorous enough. The concerns common to Nietzsche and Foucault are not only the evolutionary character of truth but also the kinship of truth with power. In Foucault's writings power permeates and inhabits almost every sphere of human activity:

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, and produces discourse. It needs to be considered as a productive network which runs through the whole social body, much more than
as a negative instance whose function is repression. (Foucault 61)

Power is not just a factor in domination but it is a grid linking all relationships, all endeavours and it is used to discipline and punish as well as to satisfy and reward.

This perspective on truth is obtained through the sharper mode of conflict, because conflict not only brings the warring parties into sharper focus but also gives blessed clarity even to less contentious issues. That is perhaps why Foucault preferred conflictual situations or preferred to view situations within the framework of "struggles and tactics" (Foucault 56).

If notions of truth get problematised, then every novel that interrogates the dominant ideology of the time, whether that ideology pertains to gender or laughter or State, must also interrogate the contemporarily accepted versions of these issues. So we have The Book of Laughter and Forgetting interrogating not only the political ideology of a Marxist state but also the accepted notions on sexuality and the philosophical issue of
what constitutes meaning and what subverts it. Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* neatly reverses the notion of the State as a paragon of justice and shows it to be implicated in dubious acts of terrorism. Arundhati Roy’s *The God of Small Things* shows that the discourse on untouchability is far from over even in a communist-governed state. Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* shows that the Church is no more virtuous than the heretics whom it chose to burn at stakes. In fact, using the authority conferred by religion people like Bernard Gui subvert the very tenets of the religion they are expected to defend. However, as the thrust of this chapter is to examine the notion of truth itself rather than the issues in which it gets contested, only the novels of Pirsig, Rushdie and Ondaatje are taken for consideration.

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* 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 Project, is felt down to the present day. *Anil's Ghost* and *Midnight's Children*, on the other hand, talk about the State's attempt to expropriate truth using all the available means of mass communication, making a frontal attack on the other, possible/plausible versions of the truth it narrates. In spite of these intimidating attempts by the State, the novels give voice to the marginalized groups and tell their story much to the discomfiture of the power blocs. In short they create situations, which are conflictual, issues, which are diametrically opposed, and forces that are battle-drawn.

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* narrates the story of the Sophists, the most maligned of groups in the annals of the history of philosophy and projects them as heroes, the pursuit of whose teachings might have taken, if not the whole of humanity, at least the Western Civilisation, along a different, "better" track, to a world which placed greater premium on all-round excellence than on a narrower pursuit of truth. In
contrast to the earliest proponents of the building blocks of Western philosophy, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle, whose dedication to the pursuit of truth is shown to be tainted after all, the Sophists are shown to be promoters of areté or all-round excellence.

From the point of view of this thesis, what is important is the fact that truth, as Foucault maintains, is not the "child of protracted solitude" (Foucault 72) nor is it free from politics. Once truth or at least the pursuit of truth is shown to be enmeshed in politics, the ground is cleared for the exposure of propaganda masquerading as truth. So Salman Rushdie "constructs" what he calls "memory's truth" (211) which shall deconstruct the official version brought out for popular consumption. Besides, once he has freed himself from the agenda of "narrating" literal truth, it enables him to deploy all the fictional devices with the help of which he can interrogate the truth claims of the official version.

Michael Ondaatje's Anil's Ghost can be interrogated for the "justification" that the State
uses as a preamble for the terrorist acts. Sarath and Anil, archaeologist and scientist respectively, have different conceptions of truth with Sarath subscribing to different regimes of truth, which are historical and Nietzschean in character and Anil holding on to an objectivist version of it. Anil's *Ghost* also takes up the issue of state censorship which is a powerful means of bringing out a univocal version of truth, and, how, despite these draconian measures, the artists succeed in subverting it with the help of "interlinear" texts much in the same manner Rushdie uses the rhetorical devices of fiction to interrogate the official version of truth.

With *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* fictionalising the philosophical interrogation of truth initiated by Nietzsche and effectively followed up by Foucault, the floodgates are now thrown open for the other novelists to pursue the same project, subject, however, to the local conditions that gave birth to the initiation and execution of the project.
It is assumed that the notion of "truth" or "search for truth" was unproblematically born. It is not even suspected that it had to undergo protracted labour pains and in the process of its birth something as valuable as truth itself was lost. Truth is believed to have had an immaculate conception and birth standing way beyond the reaches of petty power struggles and politicking. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* counters these myths and brilliantly unmasks the politics and polemics in the birth and evolution in the notions of truth. And long before Pirsig made it his project, Nietzsche had discovered the problematic origin of truth travelling a similar if not identical road and with varying consequences. Foucault, through his relentless historicizing, has brought to focus the issues with which truth is problematically enmeshed.

To understand how Pirsig's narrator is finally led to an interrogation of objectivity and its product truth, one needs to have some background information. He notices two of his friends, John and his wife Sylvia Sutherland, vainly attempting to
flee the technological landscape of modern America (15). Though it does not get stated in so many words, technology has become a death force to them resulting in the isolation of the individual in the super modern metropolis. Their occasional jaunts to the countryside afford them a brief respite from the technological hell that modern America has become. And John and Sylvia are not alone in condemning the ugly side of technology because whole masses of people share these feelings. Pirsig's narrator tries to find out how and when technology became divorced from people for whose benefit it was created anyway.

Pirsig's narrator identifies people as romantics or classicists on the basis of their reaction to technology. To a romantic, technology is "dull, awkward and ugly" (66) but a classicist is fascinated by it. If the romantic mode is "inspirational, imaginative, creative, intuitive" (66) the classic mode is governed "by reason and by laws" (67). John, a musician, finds it difficult to come to terms with technology. But fleeing from technology is self-defeating, not only because it is
so pervasive, but also because it is a product of the much valorised objectivist attitudes. This takes Pirsig's narrator on to questions of subjectivity and objectivity and how this duality became inscribed in Western thought.

The narrator of Zen has suffered a nervous breakdown earlier and the shock treatment administered seems to have not only "cured" him but has also had the additional effect of obliterating his personality whose fragments he recollects only in flashes (84). For rhetorical purposes he calls the narrator Phaedrus, a character who lived in the Socratic times. Our Phaedrus teaches English composition (rhetoric) to students in a Montana college. He finds that the classical, Aristotelian rules concerning rhetoric do not effect any real improvement in the students' writings (170). The students, however, have no difficulty in identifying the "better" writings from the rest which makes Phaedrus wonder what constitutes "Quality" in writing and thought (201-02).
Since everything in this world has been classified as either a subject or an object, Phaedrus' colleagues in the English department want him to state to which category "Quality" belongs. If Quality is purely subjective, as something that exists only in the mind, it becomes a relativist term as when we say, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder." On the contrary, if it is objective, it must be capable of definition and must have the materiality of all objects. Phaedrus realises this dilemma, which propels him on to further reflection and reading and concludes that Quality is neither a subject nor an object, but an "event" which destroys the traditional duality of subject and object:

I don't know how much thought passed before he arrived at this, but eventually he saw that Quality couldn't be independently related with either the subject or the object but could be found only in the relationship of the two with each other. It is the point at which subject and object meet. (233)
To see how this subject/object duality became historically rooted, it is necessary to go back to the beginnings of Western philosophy, especially to the teachings of Parmenides, a Pre-Socratic philosopher. He was the first to establish the distinction between appearance and reality. Commenting on the effect of Parmenides' philosophy on subsequent philosophers, Reginald E. Allen says:

Parmenides' distinction between appearance and reality and between opinion and knowledge laid the foundation for Platonism; his objections to change and plurality helped to inspire, in Aristotle's thought, the identification of matter and potentiality, and in Plato, the doctrine that the sensible world is lower in degree of reality than the world apprehended by intelligence. (11)

Once "appearance" and "reality" are so sharply differentiated, by the same rules of logic, mind and matter, subject and object can also be differentiated. In a neat summing up Pirsig points
out how far-reaching the effect of Parmenides' philosophy is: "Parmenides made it clear for the first time that the Immortal Principle, the One, Truth, God is separate from appearance and from opinion and the importance of this separation and its effect upon subsequent history cannot be overstated" (366). Only with the help of hindsight and historical recuperation do we understand that what we have all along taken to be "reality" is a "dialectical invention" (367). Digging into the etymological root of "technology" Pirsig offers the further insight that in Greek techne meant "art" (283). Technology, which is now considered to be a child of objectivity and rationality, originally connoted "art" before the subject/object division came into being.

Phaedrus's further search to discover how this duality of subject and object became deeply entrenched in Western thought takes him to the Socratic times, especially to the times of confrontation between the Sophists on the one hand and Socrates and his followers on the other. In his Introduction to Greek Philosophy, Reginald
E. Allen says that the Sophists were "wandering teachers" who taught, among other things, "literary criticism [. . .] and grammar" but whose chief aim was to "provide training in rhetoric" (15). If the occupation of the Sophists was to give training in rhetoric, their name originally connoted "wisdom": "The Greek word *sophistes* (cognate with *sophos*, 'wise') just means 'expert, ' not necessarily with any unfavourable suggestion" (Irwin 231). The term "Sophist" became pejorative thanks largely due to the relentless campaign of Socrates and his followers later. If the Sophists were men of wisdom who taught the skills of rhetoric, what was their guiding philosophy? According to Allen, Sophism is marked by a "subjective theory of truth" in which "Man is the measure of all things" (16). In reply to a question of Socrates, Protagoras, an important Sophist of the time, says that their pedagogical aim is to make people "better" (Plato 143).

Reading a book of H.D.F. Kitto titled *The Greeks* Phaedrus stumbles upon the fact that the Sophists inculcated *aretē* to their pupils. This is a
key concept in understanding what moves a Greek warrior, a Homeric hero, to deeds of heroism. In the writings of Plato, *aretē* comes to mean "virtue" giving it a moral ambience but more accurately, it means, according to Phaedrus, "excellence" (371). Elaborating it further, Phaedrus says: "*Aretē* implies a respect for the wholeness or oneness of life, and a consequent dislike of specialization. It implies a contempt for efficiency -- or rather a much higher idea of efficiency, an efficiency which exists not in one department of life but in life itself" (372). The kind of unbridled relativism, which especially Socrates and Plato charged the Sophists with pursuing, is countered by their pursuit of *aretē*. Promotion of "excellence" and "goodness" [another rendering of *aretē* according to Irwin 7] effectively forestalls charges of relativism.

In contrast, Socrates pursued "truth" and nowhere is it more emphatically stated than in the "Apology" where he confronts his interlocutors: "Are you then not ashamed to care for the getting of money, and reputation, and public honour, while
yet having no thought or concern for truth and understanding and the greatest possible excellence of your soul?" (Allen 86). He goes to the extent of declaring his willingness to die rather than give up his pursuit of truth and understanding: "Dismiss me, or do not. For I will not do otherwise, even if I am to die for it many times over" (87). The dialectical method through which Socrates cross-examines many of his hapless victims on issues such as justice, courage and piety are borne out of a desire for truth, which shall remain unimpeached by the subversive techniques of rhetoric.

The acrimony of battle between Socrates and the Sophists, which earlier puzzled Phaedrus, is now seen in a new light: "Socrates is not just expounding noble ideas in a vacuum. He is in the middle of a war between those who think truth is absolute and those who think truth is relative. He is fighting that war with everything he has. The Sophists are the enemy" (367) (Emphasis added). "War," "enemy" are scarcely the terms the reader expects to find in the disinterested pursuit of truth. But if truth is seen as locking horns with areté in a
do-or-die campaign, the conflictual nature of the origin of truth in the Western philosophic tradition becomes evident. It is in this connection that Foucault's words on how history is to be understood become significant:

Here I believe one's point of reference should not be to the great model of language (langue) and signs, but to that of war and battle. The history which bears and determines us has the form of a war rather than that of a language: relations of power, not relations of meaning. History has no "meaning" though this is not to say that it is absurd or incoherent. (Foucault 56) (Emphasis added)

If Socrates' stance towards the Sophists is marked by ironic contempt, Plato's is marked by outright condemnation. As Pirsig observes: "He damn them because they threaten mankind's first beginning grasp of the idea of truth" (368). If Socrates tried to disparage them as charlatans and quacks, Plato's method is to "encapsulate" them as
an Immutable idea of "the Good" (373). But once "the Good" is made secondary to dialectically determined truth, it can be relegated still further by some other philosopher who was not long in coming: Aristotle. Phaedrus now understands the magnitude of the struggle going on between the Sophists and the followers of Socrates: "Plato's hatred of the rhetoricians was part of a much larger struggle in which the reality of the Good, represented by the Sophists, and the reality of the True, represented by the dialecticians, were engaged in a huge struggle for the future mind of man" (365).

Phaedrus reserves some of his choicest invectives for Aristotle because he believes that it is in his teachings that the subject/object dichotomy became full-blown. The outrageous rhetorical quality of his writings and the low valuation placed on "the Good" considerably distance Phaedrus from Aristotle. The smugness of Aristotle's writings makes Phaedrus say that Aristotle was not one "to doubt Aristotle" (354). If Plato dealt in soaring generalities Aristotle seems
to be a nuts-and-bolts philosopher who preferred giving more importance to the individual horse than to “horseness.” He called the horseness its “substance” and believed knowledge increased in proportion to the “proliferation of forms” (374) describing the substance. With aretē exiled from his teachings what we have is an image of modern education (374-75).

To the Sophists “Man is the measure of all things” which underscores their humanism whereas Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle sought to discover an “absolutist” truth, something that would be true for all times and climes. The general condemnation of all Sophists in the hands of Socrates and Plato makes better sense only if we understand the oppositional values that each camp was bent on promoting. In this ideological war, dialectics, which is the parent of logic and empirical sciences, triumphed over “rhetoric.” Rhetoric was slandered and became, in the writings of Aristotle, a mere ornamentation. The slander continues to this day when we speak of “empty rhetoric” and “mere sophistry” meaning speech without substance.
No philosopher has attacked this “hegemony of truth” as vehemently and consistently as Nietzsche. He called himself a “perspectivist” meaning that one’s truth is limited to and censored by the perspective that is available to one (Reader 69). Explaining it a little more, Solomon comments in A History of Western Philosophy: “Perspectivism is a technique as well as a claim and [. . .] Nietzsche treated philosophy as an experimental discipline in which one would look now out of this window, now out of that, never settling down with one view (which he considered a form of cowardice and corruption)” (116). Since there are as many perspectives as there are human beings, the interpretations too, have become “infinite.” Nietzsche says it in his inimitable prose:

I think that today we are at least far from the ludicrous immodesty of decreeing from out of our corner that perspectives are permissible only from out of this corner. The world has rather once again become for us ‘infinite’ in so far as we cannot reject the possibility.
that it contains in itself infinite interpretations. (Reader 69)

According to him the most common failing of all philosophers is to look for truth valid for all times instead of understanding their historical character:

"Lack of historical sense is a family failing of all philosophers" (Reader 29). Once this historicity is understood, philosophers will understand that "There are no eternal facts, just as there are no absolute truths" (29). He began questioning moral absolutes and extended his examination to all issues, sometimes modifying popular misconceptions and often completely reversing their signification. According to Hollingdale, to Nietzsche even scientific facts are only "arrangements" or "interpretations" which serve no purpose other than furthering the interests of man (2). Nietzsche's quarrel with dogmatic truths and logic is too well known to be chronicled here. But what is not so familiar is the way that he holds Socrates and his followers accountable for the downgradation of aretē in their zeal to promote the cause of truth. As Durant observes in The Story of
Philosophy, to Nietzsche Socrates symbolised "a dubious enlightenment" causing "degeneration of the physical and mental powers" proper to a Greek hero; whereas Plato is "an enemy of passion," Aristotle is a promoter of the enervating doctrine of "the golden mean" (423).

It is surprising that the three philosophers whom Phaedrus holds responsible for the expulsion of areté are precisely the three whom Nietzsche too attacks and much for the same reason. What connects the three philosophers together is the supremacy they assign to reason and intelligence and their antagonism to "passion" The romantic/classical split which has become so pronounced in our times and which starts Phaedrus on his exploration originates right from the Socratic times.

Even before Saussure formally stated it, Nietzsche understood the arbitrary nature of language:

The sculptor of language was not so modest as to believe that he was only giving things designations, he conceived
rather that with words he was expressing supreme knowledge of things. (qtd. in Hollingdale 133)

As Christopher Norris usefully elaborates:

Nietzsche deconstructs the claims of philosophy by showing how they rest on unacknowledged basis of metaphor and figural representations. The most rigorous effort to exclude such devices from the text of philosophy always at some point fails to recognize their buried or covert metaphorical workings. Nietzsche determined to press this insight where it produced an ultimate aporia or undecidability with regard to all texts, his own included. (98)

When philosophers claimed to be expressing timeless verities, Nietzsche fastened on their metaphoric basis and figural dimensions to drive home the point that philosophy is no more exempt from the contingency of language than any other human science. In Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, when the Professor of Philosophy at
the University of Chicago draws attention to the Socratic analogy of the chariot drawn by a dark and white horse, he intends to assert the supremacy of reason over passion (382–83). But Phaedrus the rhetorician reminds the Professor that it is an analogy and not, as the Professor presumed, a sworn truth. What Phaedrus is doing is similar to the Nietzschean project of undermining the claims of philosophy to absolute truth through the subversive force of metaphor. This similarity is quite striking because Phaedrus is by belief and profession a rhetorician and Nietzsche too has been identified by Solomon as a “sophist” waging war against the “categorical imperatives” of Kant (From Hegel 114). Aretê, a multi-faceted word meaning virtue, excellence and goodness, is precisely what Nietzsche is trying to promote. Elucidating Nietzschean ethics, Solomon observes:

What is essential to this view of ethics -- let us not call it elitist ethics but rather an ethics of virtue, areteic ethics -- is that the emphasis is wholly on excellence, a teleological conception.
What counts for much less is obedience of rules, laws and principles, for one can be wholly obedient and also dull, unproductive and useless. (From Hegel 116) (Emphasis added)

Phaedrus too distrusts the frontbenchers in his classroom with their nice manners and neat pens and empathises with the back row students who are sullen and unruly.

Phaedrus and Nietzsche alike valorise the Homeric hero. Phaedrus values him for displaying a surpassing ability in all aspects of life, for his excellence. Nietzsche likes him for much the same reason: the totality of the man. Describing Goethe, for instance, Nietzsche says: "What he aspired to was totality; he strove against the separation of reason, sensuality, feeling, will [...]. He disciplined himself as a whole, he created himself" (Reader 259). The separation of reason and feeling and the division of subject and object came later, wedges driven by the truth-seeking philosophers.

If we expect that the struggle between dialectics and rhetoric is an issue of the past, we
are in for a surprise. In the concluding pages of *Zen*, Phaedrus narrates the absorbing attrition between himself and the Professor of Philosophy at the University of Chicago. Phaedrus has enrolled to do his PhD in "Analysis of Ideas and Methods" and the Chairman of the Committee is the Professor of Philosophy. When the Professor learns that Phaedrus teaches rhetoric, he tries his utmost to remove Phaedrus from the programme but he is unable to do so over the objection of his other colleagues. His persona is revealed to be domineering and humourless. With the skill of a rhetorician, Phaedrus dismantles his arguments and this has all the thrill of a courtroom drama.

Once the claims of the truth-seekers are shown to be steeped in politics, the floodgates are thrown open to literary arts to make a full use of this freedom guaranteed by philosophy itself. But the way postmodern fiction makes use of this freedom differs from one novel to the other and from one novelist to the other. Let us first consider the problematic construction of "truth" in Rushdie's
Midnight's Children and the various rubrics under which it operates.

The novel is in the form of a memoir of a middle-aged raconteur who was born a Kashmiri, brought up an Indian, emigrant in Pakistan and who found himself in India again after a disastrous war in Bangladesh. Its temporal coverage is as impressive as its spatial span: it talks of four generations with the perspective handled by the third generation Saleem Sinai.

The impeccable postmodern credentials of Midnight's Children -- its refusal to posit a grand ideology, its fragmented presentation of Saleem Sinai's life, its self-reflexivity and the quick shifting of narrative positions, besides the sheer amplitude and joy of narration -- may very well disguise the political agenda it has set to itself: the contestation and subversion of Official Truth with what Saleem Sinai calls "memory's truth":

'I told you the truth,' I say yet again,
'Memory's truth, because memory has its own special kind. It selects, eliminates, alters, exaggerates, minimizes, glorifies,
and vilifies also; but in the end it creates its own reality, its own heterogeneous but usually coherent version of events; and no sane human being ever trusts someone else's version more than his own.' (211)

"Memory's truth" is extremely partial, even selective, but it is the one always chosen by any "sane human being." With the legitimacy of "memory's truth" thus established the narrator is permitted to place on record his own version of events even though it may go against the grain of the official version.

The novelist also uses another ruse to secure reliability to his own narrative/narrator. He makes Saleem's birth coincide with the birth of his nation thereby tying the historical umbilical cord between the narration and the nation (1) and also endowing his narrator with the occult power to hear the voices of the midnight's children - the first one of which bends and the other one breaks the received notions of truth.
The agenda of Saleem Sinai is to prick the bubble of all grand narratives, including that of Nehru and even when the reference is complimentary to him:

Newspapers celebrated me; politicians ratified my position. Jawaharlal Nehru wrote: 'Dear Baby Saleem, My belated congratulations on the happy accident of your moment of birth! You are the newest bearer of that ancient face of India which is also eternally young. We shall be watching over your life with the closest attention; it will be, in a sense, the mirror of our own! (122)

The framed letter of the Prime Minister is enough to alarm Mary Pereira, the ayah, in whose eyes the State suddenly takes on the dimensions of the Big Brother.

The specific targets that Saleem tries to debunk are, of course, political, but, on occasions, they belong to his circle of friends and relatives such as Homi Catrall and Lila Sabarmati. Debunking, in fact, seems to be the favourite
occupation of Saleem and it is an activity which he extends to all, himself included. Ahmed Sinai’s dreams and schemes of getting-rich-quick bear fruit only to have his assets frozen (which he compares to having his balls thrust in a pack of ice); Narlikar is crushed by the very pillar that he wants to use to reclaim land from the sea; the funny song that Saleem mouths becomes the battle cry of the language-marchers; Amina Sinai loses and finds her lover only to lose again irrevocably; Saleem discovers his love for his sister only when making love to an aged prostitute; Parvati the Witch yearns for Saleem’s love only to become frustrated by Saleem’s obsession for his sister; Picture Singh wins the battle for the Most Charming Man in the World only to give up his profession altogether. The list can be extended ad infinitum.

This pricking of the bubble, this debunking, gives the novel circularity, a sense of the déjà vu. All characters desperately yearn for a change only to be thrown back to where they began. And this also lends support to the belief that nothing ever changes in India, and the more in fact they change,
the more they remain the same: "Adam Aziz attempted to fuse the skills Western and hakimi medicine, an attempt which would gradually wear him down, convincing him that the hegemony of superstition, mumbo-jumbo would never be broken in India" (67). Apart from serving to remind us of the recurrence of the same power in ever-new configurations, this debunking is used to demystify certain grand visions and ideologies (the Official Truth). For instance, Nehru and Indira, architects of modern India, rational, cosmopolitan, socialist, proud possessors of grand visions of India are debunked with subtle ease when they are shown to be as superstitious and credulous as their own country men: "Jawaharlal Nehru was consulting astrologers about the country's Five Year Plan, in order to avoid another Karamstan" (158). The grand narrative of greater and stronger India, posited by Indira Gandhi and her cohorts as a pretext for the imposition of the Emergency, might well mask her political ambitions and skulduggery. Saleem's "mini-narrative" is an attempt to expose the seamy side of the Emergency in which gifted
individuals like the midnight's children were perceived to be threats to the entrenched and dynastic power blocs. In other words, Saleem's "circular" narrative subverts the linear model of the dictators, whether Indian or Pakistani, whose baser motives are sought to be camouflaged by teleological tall-claims.

Saleem opposes the linear meta-narratives of the power blocs, by focusing, on the one hand, on the apparently trivial (ignored by the grand narratives of Truth) and by offering circular narratives, on the other. This statement can be amplified with examples. The silver spittoon inlaid with lapis lazuli not only links Saleem to his ancestral past but the jets of betel-streams issuing from the lips of the "hit- the- spittoon" contestants become an honest pastime against the backdrop of political intrigue and murder in pre-independent India. Rani of Cooch Naheen, the patron of intellectuals and artists and poets says:

'Well, I shall set aside a room, perhaps; for paan-eating and spittoon-hittery. I have a superb silver spittoon, inlaid with
lapis lazuli, and you must all come and practise. Let the walls be splashed with our inaccurate expectorating! They will be honest stains, at least.' (45)

On the day Saleem is arrested by the goon-squads of the Prime Minister, he also loses his spittoon, which soon becomes inscribed with questions of identity and freedom:

I lost something else that day, besides my freedom: bulldozers swallowed a silver spittoon. Deprived of the last object connecting me to my more tangible, historically verifiable past, I was taken to Benares to face the consequences of my inner, midnight-given life. (432)

Honest entertainment, freedom and identity are the virtues that the lowly spittoon represents, precisely those virtues that are lacking in government agencies and enterprise. On the other side of the western border the generals are shown plotting the overthrow of the elected government on grounds of corruption and inefficiency. General
Zulfikar outlines his plan to oust the civilian government of Pakistan and impose military rule. In a hilarious example of how the trivial can be used to subvert the grand, the pepper pots are used to indicate government targets. And it is only a small step for the pepper-pot generals to become tin-pot dictators (289).

The grand concepts of Time and History are not so much challenged as infiltrated by the homelier images of chutney and pickle making. Earlier Saleem had wondered if the Indians could really have a "firm grip on time" (106) because their concept of time is compromised by a linguistic quirk: "[...] no people whose word for 'yesterday' is the same as their word for 'tomorrow' can be said to have a firm grip on the time" (106) [The word kal in Hindi means both 'yesterday' and 'tomorrow']. The grand concepts of Time and History are "pickled" or, mediated, by the repertoire of personal memories making up *Midnight's Children*: "Every pickle-jar [...] contains, therefore, the most exalted of possibilities: the feasibility of the chutnification of
history; the grand hope of the pickling of time!"

(459)

As against the linearity of the macro-narratives, which are basically teleological or utopian in their goals, Saleem bends history to follow an elliptical orbit which joins the one end of a narrative to its beginning. A powerful image of Picture Singh ("the Most Charming Man in the World") with the head of a king cobra thrust in his mouth comes to mind. This image, reminiscent of the snake swallowing itself, not only corresponds to the narrativity of Midnight's Children, but also serves to underline what is usually forgotten: the "reality" of the postmodern narratives is not any the less "real" because they are presented within the configurations of magic realism. As the narrator observes, it can reinforce reality by bending it:

(After Picture Singh had demonstrated with the cobra's head in his mouth)

Watching this scene, Saleem learned that Picture Singh and the magicians were people whose hold on reality was
absolute; they gripped it so powerfully that they could bend it every which way in the service of their arts, but they never forgot what it was. (399)

Similarly Salman Rushdie could bend reality "every which way" in the service of "his" art because his grip over it is sure.

The circularity of Midnight's Children is "worked out" on other planes as well. For instance, Aadam Aziz is resurrected in his great grandson Aadam Sinai though this "resurrection" is complicated by their differences. Whereas the former was something of an idealist, the latter, though young, already shows signs of his "real" father's cynical, pragmatist roots (459). This difference is also marked in the births of Saleem and Aadam Sinai: Saleem was born in the India of Independence, idealism and high hopes marking its emergence; elephant-eared Aadam's birth coincides with the declaration of the Emergency, a dark chapter in Indian history, signifying despair and disillusionment. Jawaharlal Nehru's initial prophecy linking "Baby Saleem" to the newly-independent
India and his assurance that the State would be watching over him are darkly fulfilled when Saleem is arrested and sentenced to jail and later castrated by Indira's minions (440). Aadam Aziz returns to Kashmir of his birth only to die there (462). Pakistan's brief flirtations with democracy are upstaged by longer and longer periods of military rule with the generals displaying the same vulnerability to corruption as the civilian rulers. Misfortune seems to dog Ahmed Sinai wherever he goes: his rexine factory in Delhi is torched by the Ravana Gang (89) and his towel factory in Karachi fares no better (344). Caught in this silken, elliptical orbit, the characters and events seem to replicate themselves endlessly.

Anil's Ghost by Michael Ondaatje has none of the magic realist trappings of Midnight's Children though the poet in Ondaatje often surfaces in the deft coining of phrases and striking imagery. But in the manner of all postmodern fiction it too sets to itself the agenda of constructing and disputing two disparate truth-claims neither of which completely invalidates the other.
On the surface of it, life is normal in Sri Lanka. A casual visitor with no conception of its current or past history might think that Sri Lanka is what the travel brochures describe it to be: a country of palm-fringed beaches and blue lagoons, a land of prawn and pomfret-curry. But beneath its normality lurk such violence and sudden deaths, which could make, as the narrator of Anil's Ghost says, "the darkest Greek tragedies" appear "innocent" (11). The fight involved, in the eighties and nineties, three groups: the Tamil separatists in the north, the insurgents in the south and the government forces. In response to the declaration of war by both the groups, the government began conducting anti-terrorist operations with the net result being a huge harvest in human lives.

With the suspicion mounting that the government too is engaged in the dubious business of eliminating political opponents through the help of killer gangs, Anil Tissera, a forensic scientist deputed by an international human rights organisation, comes across, in the course of her diggings, a surprisingly "recent" skeleton among
the bones of the Buddhist era. She begins to focus her attention on this single specimen believing that it holds the key for other, government-sponsored, liquidations: "Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest" (56). Anil names him "Sailor" (51).

Even as the "Sailor" falsifies the proverb that "Dead men tell no tales" by narrating his own gruesome story of torture and victimisation, there is a parallel debate in progress between Sarath and Anil on what constitutes "truth." This debate has to be read in the context of propaganda masquerading as truth and regimes of state censorship. Commenting on the contrasting perspectives from which Anil and Sarath view truth, Robert Eder says in an essay published on the Internet:

Anil comes with Western-bred investigative passion: the certainty that facts are there to be unearthed and that truth is to be constructed out of them. Sarath, a polymorphous spirit and the book's most memorable figure, cautions that the real truth of his country is
ambiguous and unobtainable. 'I want you to understand the archaeological surround of a fact,' he tells her.

Anil believes, like a true scientist, in "objective" truth, a relentless pursuit of it, and the liberating effect it has: "We use the bones to search for it. 'The truth shall set you free.' I believe that" (102).

Sarath's conception of truth is that of the historian or archaeologist, who, in the course of his studies, comes across different regimes of truth, like, for example, the twenty Chinese women-musicians who allowed themselves to be buried along with their Emperor (261). There is, however, another disturbing implication: the conviction with which the women decided to die has the force of truth, and the same conviction is also to be seen in the "sacrifice" of the suicide bomber who is the latest avatar of the terrorist. The point-counterpoint is that the stark incidents of terrorism which are found strewn around in this novel and the discussion of Anil and Sarath on what constitutes "truth" are intensely related, because it is the belief in the "fixity" of his own truth (in
contradistinction to the Nietzschean relativity of it) that becomes the motor force behind the terrorist act.

In another, conceptually related, development, Palipana, Sarath's teacher, finds that modern states alone are not guilty of this obfuscation of truth, this dilution by propaganda; this has been going on all the time, even in the times of monarchy, but the clever artist finds a way to confound this censorship through "interlinear texts" and obscure verses:

In the last few years he had found the hidden histories, intentionally lost, that altered the perspective and knowledge of earlier times. It was how one hid or wrote the truth when it was necessary to lie. He had deciphered the shallowly incised lines during lightning, had written them down during rain and thunder. A portable sulphur lamp or a thorn brushfire by the overhang of cave. The dialogue between old and hidden lives, the back-and-forth between what was
official and unofficial during solitary field trips, when he spoke to no one for weeks, so that these became his only conversations -- an epigraphist studying the specific style of a chisel cut from the fourth century, then coming across an illegal story, one banned by kings and state and priests, in interlinear texts. These verses contained the darker proof.

(105)

But this important finding of Palipana is scorned as "overinterpretation" and since the truth of his finding is too close for comfort for the present government, he finds his own name erased from all references (96).

*Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* narrates the fascinating struggle between the Sophists and the truth-seeking philosophers with the latter not only monopolising the whole of Western philosophy to themselves but also conditioning the very course of Western civilisation itself. Their Pyrric victory, however, is the cause of many modern evils like the deeply inscribed duality
between the subject and the object and creation of alienating technologies from which man is forced to flee. More importantly, from the point of view of this thesis, it shows the problematic origin of the notions of truth, which becomes the staple of postmodern fictions.

Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost* capitalise on this problematisation. The artist-narrator of *Midnight’s Children* builds his narrative on “memory’s truth” which contests the “truth” of the State. “Memory’s truth” is the subjective version of truth, whose echoes are to be heard in the Sophists’ pronouncement, “Man is the measure of all things.” The discernible circularity of *Midnight’s Children* is at odds with the linear progression of objective truth, the causes and effects and chain reactions. The elevation of the trivial over the grand narratives of Truth and Progress, as, for example, the centre stage given to silver spittoons, chutneys and pickles, is a reminder that the marginalized has a story to tell, more engrossing than most mainstream narratives. This is precisely what Palipana, the aged
epigraphist of Anil's Ghost, finds in the interlinear inscriptions: proof that the States, whether modern or ancient, have always been guilty of waging war on truth. The sculptor, fearful of risking his life, still manages to narrate, through the shallowly chiselled inscriptions, an absorbing tale totally at variance with the mainstream narrative he has been commissioned to inscribe. Midnight's Children and Anil's Ghost also foreground the rather uncomfortable and frequently hostile relationship between the State and Truth, which is evidenced in the continual invocation of the censorship. It is this consistent, even obsessive, preoccupation with what constitutes Truth that gives Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance, Midnight's Children and Anil's Ghost a common and shared agenda. If Zen unearths the politics and polemics in the evolution of the notions of Truth by historicizing philosophy, the other two novels hint at the plurality of Truth by fictionalising history of the more recent past.

All the three novels, however, show Truth to be a fiercely contested site of power. In the struggle between the Truth Seekers and the
Sophists it becomes a coveted object of a prolonged philosophical conflict. In *Midnight’s Children* and *Anil’s Ghost*, the artist and the historian, respectively, have to assert the primacy of their own version of Truth against the State’s version, but, by doing so, one has to pay with his manhood and the other with his life.