Politics and the Novel: An Introduction

On the surface, politics and the novel seem to relate to different polarities of human existence: one subscribes to the aesthetic principle whereas the other has come to signify opportunism, power and profit. The terms have been so variously described and discussed that to arrive at any conclusive formulation is not only difficult but nearly impossible. Their inherent opposition cannot be negated, but equally significant is their closeness, often confrontation and many times interaction.

As soon as one uses the term "politics" in relation to literature, any number of doubts come to one's mind. The word evokes varied images; their ethnicity, time and locale may differ depending upon who ponders over them and in which corner of the globe, but each is bound to be tinged with sordidness, at times to the extent of being bizarre. No matter which vantage-point we choose to take, the shades of political activity remain the same: those of intrigues, strategies and subterfuge. Even when not associated with extremes of situations, i.e. as just a plain feature of the
public realm, politics has come to be known as goal-oriented power play. Analysing this aspect Victor J. Seidler explains:

Politics becomes appropriated into a form of instrumentalism because it operates within the context of emotionality which inevitably constitutes a blindness to reality itself. . . . So it is that politics becomes a matter of achieving power to legislate for goals that have been set by reason alone.\(^1\)

It is due to this aspect of politics—an activity devoid of all finer feelings, a matter of reason, power and interests—that legitimacy of politics interacting with literature is doubted. And Stendhal must have had all these connotations at the back of his mind when he said, "Politics in a work of literature is like a pistol-shot in the middle of a concert. . . ."\(^2\)

All the same, it simply cannot be wished away. For it remains a brutal and palpable fact of today that the fate of humankind—whether it opts for self-extermination or for political arrangements that enable our species to survive—is now being decided by politics and politicians. So close has this new brand of politics come to us that it has politicised our everyday experience. It is no longer a matter of conforming to some political convictions, nor of commitment to some party or group; rather it has became a way of life. The wide implications of this assertion can be better grasped if read in the context of the essential hypothesis that Raymond Williams posits in the development of the idea of culture—"that the art of a period is closely related to the generally prevalent 'way of life,' and . . . in consequence, aesthetic, moral and social judgements are closely interrelated."\(^3\) Ample evidence to this effect is scattered all over the annals of literature. One can discover the connection without going too far back: whether the socio-political dramas of Bertolt Brecht or the highly esoteric plays of Samuel Beckett; the philosophic musings of J. Alfred Prufrock or the revolutionary poetry of Pablo Neruda—all had their genesis in the prevailing social conditions and the world-views of their respective writers. It is more true of the novel, be it Fielding's *Tom Jones* or George Eliot's *Middlemarch*, Dostoevsky's *The Possessed* or Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*. 
Problem of Definition

A peep down the ages reveals that each successive generation, from pre-Christian Greeks to contemporary theorists, seems to have had its own particular view of the nature and practice of politics. But each in its own view and conception is "culture-bound." Thus like most other human activities, politics as a concept is limited by time and space, and it has both geographical and cultural-intellectual horizons. More or less the same may be said of the novel. Even a cursory glance through Miriam Allott's *The Novelists on the Novel* brings out the varied responses that the genre itself and its various aspects have evoked from time to time. Here, too, one confronts the difficulty in confining the term to any set formula. Despite all this, it would not be entirely irrelevant to trace out certain common denominators which may be responsible for the convergence of these supposedly opposed concepts.

It is a widely acknowledged fact that all art has a human basis; works of art represent the self-created efforts of men to understand the complexities around them. As the spontaneous expression of felt needs, the novel has an even greater relevance today when the individual has been reduced to "a voice crying in wilderness." It falls to the share of a writer to make known the significance to which attention might not otherwise be given. Robert Alter expresses this attribute as follows:

> The novel, by virtue of its narrative capaciousness and its integrity as a poetic reconstruction of the world, is usually not content just to represent character in particular social or historical circumstances, but also leads us to reflect on the ultimate purpose and meaning of an individual life.

It goes without saying that the "social" and the "historical" include in themselves political circumstances as well.

Initially politics was looked upon as another aspect to provide wholeness to man's existence. Only with the advent of a peculiar modernism—as human nature and values underwent a reduction and as the basis for the nexus between man and man altered to pure self-interest—politics came to acquire its present day aura of crudity and callousness.
However, it is the human factor that gets accentuated when Aristotle says
"man is by nature a political animal" and that "men coalesce and strive to
maintain political society for the sake of mere life. . . .". This "mere life" is
what provides all the raw material for the novel. The mimetic potentialities
of this genre make each novel an attempt to understand the enigma of
human situation through fictional characters.

As politics has begun to interfere more and more with life, so has its
meaning and scope broadened to acquire a new dimension. It now includes
"any persistent pattern of human relationships that involves to a significant
extent, control, influence, power or authority." Once again it is the human
connection that gets signified though one may argue that men and societies
cannot be always confined to the relationships of power, property and
subjugation. The sphere of human experience is vast; it includes love and
hate, joy and sorrow, hope and despair; and as Marcuse suggests "in terms
of political economy they may not be 'forces of production' but for every
human being they are decisive, they constitute reality." Moreover, society
itself is founded on exceptionally complicated relations between different
systems which when stripped of all other appendages emerge as politics,
art, economics and family structure. This interrelatedness of politics with
other social structures proves deterministic for its subtle but multi-
dimensional impact on literature. Simultaneously, in an era of multiplying
and disintegrating faiths, the novel becomes a microcosm where highly
peculiar individuals struggle for their right to growth and happiness which
is to be made possible or impossible by the emerging political structures.

Scope and Objectives

Here it would be appropriate to point out that our concern with
politics is almost as a philosophical concept that shapes and modulates
attitudes not only in life but also in literature. The scope of our study does
not include the morphology of various shades of present-day pragmatic
politics, "the exclusive arms of which are circumscribed by the exigencies of attaining and staying in power."\textsuperscript{10} We are again not concerned with "directly unequivocal political attitudes," to use Lukács's words,\textsuperscript{11} but rather with the presence of an underlying ideology in a work of art and its genuine capacity to develop a perception of reality by investigating the human ambiguities contained in politics. The attempted approach is, therefore, not only intertextual but also as far as possible interdisciplinary in scope. I hope to explain the psychological and sociological bases for various shades of politics and the uses to which literature has put them.

**Politics and the Writer**

The question that frames itself at this juncture is: what is the relevance of probing into political dimension of a writer's work? The basic issue at the core of every novel always remains the same: what is man or wherein lies his identity? Thus all other aspects of existence which act upon him, influence his \textit{Weltanschauung}, determine his essential tendencies, automatically come within the purview of literature. Nowadays politics is inescapable because nothing is apolitical; even the non-political temper implies a choice, a conscious opting out of the system.

Moreover, the close of the twentieth century has witnessed devaluation, not only in the purchasing power of money but also in many of our age-old beliefs and institutions. Various factors have brought this about: predominant among them are excessive mechanisation, religious fanaticism, fascism, communism and consumerism. All these forces point to a gradual deterioration in the self-image of man. For all his progress, some "residue" of frustration, some discontent always lurks in him; it negates all his effort to have a more satisfying life. This residue is "due to the imperfection of our political and social system," states Edwin Muir, and adds that "the corollary of the natural man is consequently the political man."\textsuperscript{12} This shift from natural to political or from man of impulse and
reason to man in search of sensation and momentous satisfaction has other consequences too. Earlier an individual’s life was looked upon as a conflict, but to the modern man it is a development while being part of “a greater development which is essentially political or sociological, not moral or religious.”\textsuperscript{13} The novel responds by reacting to this over-simplification that denies man’s innate complexity. The reaction manifests itself in a number of ways: in the exaltation of sensation in place of emotion and reason, in the changed concept of hero, and even in the writer’s attitude to the pragmatics of narrative.

At the same time, the desire to take issue with the affairs of the time has nearly become a compulsion of the writer of today for the simple reason that the reality around is imbued with politics. Gunter Grass, while in conversation with Salman Rushdie, seems to have touched the heart of the matter when he asserts that he cannot avoid politics intruding upon his writing because he cannot escape from the history of his country or his own history. Every second sentence takes him back to “this ugly reality we are living in.” He echoes the feelings of many others when he states that “the situation of writing has changed, because the situation of life has changed.”\textsuperscript{14} The change implies the crisis that we as a civilization face, which in turn has lead to a complete interiorization of politics. It, therefore, becomes worthwhile to investigate this changed situation of life and consequently of writing.

\textbf{Living Through Crisis}

It will not be an overstatement to remark that our social and individual situation is precariously balanced, bound to erupt into chaos at the slightest provocation. The terrible quality of this crisis which the poets, writers and intellectuals started voicing immediately after the First World War has not allayed in any way. Rather the fragility of life, the thinness of history is felt more acutely each day. “An infinity of horror” confronts us,\textsuperscript{15} and man is weighed down with the sense of his own mortality and the realization that “the chasm of history is big enough to hold everybody.”\textsuperscript{16}
C. Day Lewis strikes a slightly variant note when he states in the preface to *The Mind in Chains* that “the human mind is still in chains, bound no longer by religious superstitions, potentially free from the limitations of economic circumstances . . . but bound by a system”\(^\text{17}\) which has transformed the individual into a dispensable commodity in the *société de consummation*. Because of this historical and political despair, we are now compelled to confront the choice between life and death for our species. This ontological choice figures as one of the key motifs in Doris Lessing’s *Children of Violence* sequence as it does in Orwell, Koestler, Milan Kundera and Solzenitsyn, to name a few.

Stuart Hall, a leading cultural critic, mentions four dimensions of this crisis: the economic, the political, the ideological, and the cultural one.\(^\text{18}\) The social crisis with which the modern novel is primarily concerned comes about due to the inability of people to adapt themselves to change in a positive way. But the most acute expression of the general crisis of our time is the political one. It is because all our moral and ideological conflicts have a political background. Graham Greene, Sartre and Grass are some among those who often illustrate this point in their novels. It is no longer possible for artists to delude themselves into believing that their art is a thing apart. A study of political relationships at different planes is, therefore, as valid as the study of any other relationship that might have occupied human interest at any time or age.

**Politics, Novel and Experience**

The conceptualisation of life’s phenomena and its end result—the ideological and philosophical content of a novel—grow out of a writer’s individual experience and his capability to comprehend the turbulence of the times. Jameson has aptly observed that “the framework of the work of art is individual lived experience.”\(^\text{19}\) The writer, by exercising a subtle creative discretion through the principles of absorption and reformulation, puts only so much of his own experience as can be deemed relevant by an analytical creative intelligence.
Reality is a highly complex phenomenon; it has various aspects and possibilities as Wallace Stevens suggests in his poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird." Faulkner, in *Absalom! Absalom!*, puts forth a number of possible versions of reality through Thomas Sutpen's story. Reality thus exists in plural form; there can be so many realities. If the first, most significant is an individual's personal, inner reality—his dreams, unexpressed thoughts, fantastic ideas—the second sort is always the socio-political reality.

Politics, therefore, is one of the shaping forces of objective reality. One may say that "politics of experience" depends upon a certain "experience of the political." The very process of creative selection out of the vast store of experience reflects a certain stance that a writer chooses to adopt. Aldridge explains it as

a process of assigning value to certain portions of that experience.
One might say that the quality which most clearly distinguishes literary material from mere experiences is the value the writer has been able to give to it, within a dramatic or narrative framework.20

There is a politics inherent in the decision to consider certain things as well as in the way of saying things. In this regard Lyotard is worth considering:

Everything is political if politics is one of the different* on the occasion of the slightest linkage. Politics is not everything, though, if by that one believes it to be the genre that contains all the genres.
It is not one genre.21

This interesting analysis is followed by an equally informative connecting comment—"politics is not so much a genre as the struggle between genres."22 And the entire argument is subsumed in the broad construct of the "politics of representation".

It is also a central proposition of Marxism that "writing, like other practices is in an important sense always aligned: that is to say it variously expresses, explicitly or implicitly, specially selected experiences from a

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*A point of incommensurability, of dispute or difference where no criteria exist for judgement, where the sides speak radically different or heterogeneous languages.
specific point of view." Related with this is the question of commitment which implies a conscious choice of position on the part of the writer. But in a novel it may get reflected so subtly as to be the mere resonance of an attitude.

It has been increasingly recognised that private and personal relationships are also relationships of power and subordination. The quality and meaningfulness of these emotional relationships can be fully grasped if they are understood as relationships of power and dependency. This involves a recognition of the personal as political. Political, thus, is not just what happens in the public world, but there is also a politics of everyday. In the light of it a right balance needs to be struck between politics and experience in order to accommodate ourselves to the changes around us. As the personal and the political are brought into harmony, so will change our perception of the role and limits of politics in our lives. It will enable us to be less suspicious of our experience and of the "otherness" of human beings.

One can say without any exaggeration that all these multifarious micro-relationships are duly covered within the wide scope of the novel. It is for this reason that the novel has been repeatedly singled out as "the genre of self and world, internal and external, private and public," so that it might provide aesthetic satisfaction by its creative resolution of various polarities.

**Politics as Structuring Principle: Some Observations**

That Politics and aesthetics often overlap or tend to get superimposed—sometimes by design (of powers that be) and sometimes by artistic compulsion—has become an acknowledged fact. Opinions, however, differ as to the structural role of politics in the making of a work of art and its acceptable ratio in the content of a work. In the epilogue to *Illuminations*, Walter Benjamin points out how political and philosophical considerations
succeed or fail in lending a pattern to the whole structure. He views man’s preoccupation with self as a “fall” from a glorified state, and uses it as a reference-point to relate politics and aesthetics:

Mankind, which in Homer’s time was an object of contemplation for the Olympian gods, now is one for itself. Its self-alienation has reached such a degree that it can experience its own destruction as an aesthetic pleasure of the first order. This is the situation of politics which Fascism is rendering aesthetic. Communism responds by politicizing art.25

Speaking from the not-so-comfortable position of a die-hard communist, Ralph Fox states, “. . . in many cases literature is political, openly and deliberately political art.”26 He believes that the literary text has the capacity to bring about a “gestalt-switch,” and quotes the example of Gorki’s *Mother* as a mind-swaying literary works. But for Lu Hsun it is altogether idealistic to ascribe any transforming attribute to art.27 Though conceding that all literature is shaped by its environment, he rejects the claim that literature can influence the course of the world affairs or really promote changes in the world. On the other hand, he holds the view that it is art that imbibes the influence of politics and gets transformed in turn. Marcuse favours somewhat similar view though his concerns are different. In the very opening paragraph of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, he speaks of “the miserable reality” that can be changed only through “radical political praxis.” He sees the element of despair inherent in “the retreat into a world of fiction where existing conditions are changed and overcome only in the realm of imagination.”28

As against this view, Lionel Trilling believes that literature and politics have an inevitable intimate connection though it may not be always obvious. To trace their affinity he refers back to the mind and its processes, and suggests that ideas germinate in sentiments and they in turn influence feelings. He further substantiates his point by quoting Charles Péguy’s pithy comment: “everything begins in sentiment and assumption and finds its issue in political action and institutions.”29 From this angle politics is no longer distinct from “the politics of culture.”30 The phrase refers to the
organisation of human life with a view to modify feelings and bring about a change in the quality of life.

Raymond Williams seems to have clinched the issue when, while discussing G. Eliot’s *Felix Holt*, he categorically states:

> It has passed too long for a kind of maturity and depth in experience to argue that politics and political attachments are only possible to superficial minds: that any appreciation of the complexity of human nature necessarily involves a wise depreciation of these noisy instruments.\(^{31}\)

The significant point that emerges from these critical observations is that any dimension of politics is a viable strand only so long as it comments upon life and poses questions or provides answers about human situations. Literature has greater relevance today not because of its interaction with politics, but more essentially because it is “the human activity that takes the fullest and most precise account of variousness, possibility, complexity, and difficulty.”\(^{32}\)

**Politics: Its Nuances in the Novel**

In any enduring work of fiction, politics can at best be one of its many substrata. When Thomas Mann says that every intellectual attitude is “latently political,” he obviously means this in the widest sense that there can be no serious writing which does not have a political thread in its weave.

Whether the writer should dabble in politics or take the public path is an on-going debate. The conservative attitude about writing holds that it is somehow separate from public issues and ought to be separated from them. The post-modernist critique also seeks to separate the text from the world but for very different reasons. At the same time there are writers for whom politics forms an essential part of their mental make-up. These are the writers who have been political activists, pursuing their belief in action and words. A remarkable instance of this has been the Spanish Civil War in
1936 when many writers joined the international brigade to fight the fascists. The most prominent of these were George Orwell and Ernest Hemingway. While Hemingway used his civil war experience to produce his masterpiece *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, Orwell wrote the finely controlled *Homage to Catalonia* apart from his essays and journalism. In the more recent times Malraux and Silone were active political figures till shortly before they turned to literature. Silone continued to participate in the Italian Socialist Movement even after he wrote *The Seed Beneath the Snow*, a novel exemplifying a kind of Christian passivity and a fraternity beyond sainthood. As a committed Marxist, Doris Lessing too has been an active member of various left-wing groups. Salman Rushdie, while reminiscing about his adolescent years, also admits the influence that Faez, a communist poet and committed political figure, had on him. He confesses to have consciously thought that a writer should also deal in politics.33

From this it may be concluded that in its overt interaction with literature politics influences writers in different ways. In its most significant aspect, it provides a backdrop for their work: the personal political experiences shaping their ideology and writing so that political realities become the underpinning for fiction. The works blend real life situations and imaginative occurrences to make a point that goes way beyond immediate politics to a humanistic horizon. First among them are the novels that have war as their subject matter or backdrop. Besides *For Whom the Bell Tolls*, other unforgettable examples are Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* and Joseph Heller’s *Catch-22*. All view war from a purely human perspective; the idea that surfaces is that in most cases misery is the outcome of political ambition.

Then there are those that have revolution, revolutionary ardour or demystification of revolution as their predominant themes. The longer a people have been through struggle and strife, have suffered at the hands of reigning power, the more vivid have been the images and motifs of revolution in their literature. The reason is easy to trace: an experience
soaked in different forms and shades of politics can hardly project itself in language without allowing politics to seep in. In late nineteenth century Dostoevsky, Turgeniev, and Henry James take revolutionary politics as their subjects; so does Conrad in the beginning of the twentieth century. M. Sholokhov draws upon his experiences of Russian revolution; his communist heroes reveal a tremendous energy, force and will-power. Malraux's *Man's Fate* is set in the disastrous Chinese revolution of 1927 whereas rebellious doubt is one of the ideas underlying Ignazio Silone's *Bread and Wine*. Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Moon* is a poignant account of the arrest of an old Bolshevik by the Stalin government and his gradual capitulation to its inquisitors. Ideological conflicts and the aftermath of revolution also form the basis for nearly all novels of Milan Kundera.

Another significant political strain that reverberates through various modern novels is that of colonial experience. One of the most puzzling contradictions of our century has been its loud claims of humanistic values, fiercely voiced through various international organisations on one side, and inexpressible suppression of entire races on the basis of colour differences on the other. As the ills of colonialism were felt more and more strongly, as more and more colonized people began to demand their right to live freely and honourably, writers too could not be a mute witness to this human drama. Novelists in different parts of the world have used colonialism to explore the range of emotions—sometimes cruelty and sometimes just ambiguity of human intentions. E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* has its origin in this political concept while it also unravels the unfathomable depths of human heart. The central core of the novel is the relationship of Aziz the Indian and Fielding the Englishman, but in the course of its exploration a great many fundamental social, political and moral issues get highlighted. At one level *Heart of Darkness* also calls attention to Conrad's scepticism about the colonial/imperial enterprise.

Related with this aspect is the problem of South Africa which has become a symbol of all the paradoxes inherent in colonialism, and has
consequently inspired many writers—black and white alike—to voice the anguish of the exploited native. South African literature in English has its own particularly strong tradition in the field of realistic fiction, usually with political implications. Olive Schreiner’s *The Story of a South African Farm* (1883) has the distinction of founding the South African novel proper. There are other remarkable examples: Sarah Gertrude Millin’s *God’s Step Children*, Plomer’s *Turbott Wolfe*, Alan Paton’s *Cry, the Beloved Country* and George Heaton Nicholls’ *Bayete! Hail to the King*. Among those writing now, Nadine Gordimer, Peter Abrahams and J.M. Coetzee figure pre-eminently. They have written powerful fictions arraigning apartheid. Doris Lessing, sometimes addressed as the Rhodesian novelist, has herself dwelt upon the South African predicament from time to time very evocatively and humanistically. In her very first novel, *The Grass is Singing*, the land and its people come alive as do the tragic consequences that follow the alien influence of the colonizer. Her volumes of South African short stories bring out her essential attitude: for her the subjugation of a race, the denigration of its myths and superstitions is a betrayal of humanity and all noble values.

Though not entirely on the same line, here may be included the novels that have as their setting the peculiar political complexities of the third world. Foremost among them are many novels of Graham Greene, including *The Quiet American*, *Our Man in Havana* and *The Honorary Consul*. Here may also be grouped V.S. Naipaul’s novels such as *In a Free State*, *Guerrillas*, and *A Bend in the River*. In the U.S. a number of black writers—James Bladwin, the pioneer among them—have articulated their feelings against political and racial suppression. Faulkner, Ralph Ellison, Norman Mailer etc. have depicted in their works the isolation and alienation that is a part of the black experience in America, a theme so poetically and compassionately rendered by Toni Morrison in most of her works, above all in *The Bluest Eye* and *Beloved*.

Ironically enough the boundless liberalism of the twentieth century has also witnessed the large scale persecution of writers for their ideological
leanings. Viewing literature as a potent adversary, regimes have sought to stifle politically embarrassing writers. This has happened in varying degrees across the globe: in third world countries, in fundamentalist regimes, martial law governments and communist states. Politics invariably crept into the writings of Brecht, Thomas Mann and Solzenitsyn because their lives were touched by this problem. Some of the persecuted writers have become causes célèbres for the Western liberal media—two recent examples being Rushdie and Taslima Nasreen—but there are many who have languished and died unsung. Nowhere has this been worst than in the communist bloc countries, particularly in the post-revolution USSR. The intellectual confinement of Anna Akhmatova (she was prohibited from publishing from 1920 to 1940), Gorki's death in ambiguous circumstances and Solzenitsyn's expulsion in 1974 provide substantial proof of the price that the writers had to pay for their political stands.

Apart from the writers who use human affairs to refract politics, there are those who have consistently used literature to propound their political beliefs, right from the time of Swift's satires to Dostoevsky's disavowal of anarchism in *Crime and Punishment*. French writers like Camus, Aragon and Sartre did so in their thinly disguised fictions. At this point must also be mentioned those who adopted a futuristic outlook and used their writings to profess their innermost fears regarding the brutalisation and over-politicisation of man in totalitarian regimes. Zamytin, Huxley and Orwell showed us "how easily our dreams of social heaven may be translated into living hell." Their novels—*We*, *Brave New World* and *Nineteen Eighty Four*—have been termed as "the authentic political allegories of our age." They represent a different form, a generic variation, the genealogy of which can be traced back to H.G. Wells' writings.

Thus we discover that politics acts upon the creative mind in various ways; the novels consequently reflect its different shades. However, it is imperative that politics must not detract or distract from the effectiveness of
the novel as “an imaginative instrument for the empirical exploration of social, moral, and psychological realities.”

**The Political Novel**

Only those novels stand the test of time in which characters are firmly rooted in their milieu, and the political moral is implied and never loudly stated. For the novel’s concern is not only with the workings of society but with the idea of society operating problematically through the consciousness of its characters. The political novel can at its best show concretely and subtly, as Robert Alter points out, “what politics does to characters, what character makes of politics.”

Here I would like to point out that I use the term “political novel” with great reservations. To my mind, it implies a rather closed form that tends to ignore other equally significant dimensions in a novel, thus cancelling out its vast potentiality. Moreover, the term has a vagueness about it: novels, quite different in kind are often grouped under the same label. It, therefore, will be more in accordance with our purpose to use the term as a convenient denomination rather than as a defining or evaluating device.

One may finally say without overstating that the political novel does not comment upon the nature of politics, rather it shows how politics might fit into some larger vision of human condition. Dostoevsky’s *The Possessed* is an unforgettable case in point, in which political ideas play a predominant role; so is Conrad’s *Nostromo*, in which political milieu provides the essential backdrop for the action and revelation of characters. Doris Lessing blends these two aspects to illuminate the manner in which political consciousness becomes the stuff of fiction.

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**Politics in Modern English Novel: A Brief Outline**

Though the twentieth century has been accused of over-politicization, politics as a constitutive element of literature is not an altogether new
concept. Linking the beginnings of the English novel with politics, Ralph Fox has, interestingly enough, pointed out that one of the founder fathers of the novel, Daniel Defoe, was intensely political in all his work and that his best known *Robinson Crusoe* was used as the basis for lectures in political economy. But politics as the main structural force is first strikingly and completely visible in Benjamin Disraeli’s (1804-1881) novels; his political experiences provide him with all the material for his writings. Amongst the early Victorians, Trollope handles the theme of politics in *Phineas Finn* and *The Prime Minister* while remaining indifferent to political theory. Different in approach from Disraeli and even Wells, he is political only in so far as his main characters are heavily engaged in politics in the social background of Parliament.

Politics as an oblique and stealthy force can be seen at work in some of George Eliot’s novels as well. Her genius for social analysis includes the contemporary political concerns such as the judicious use of the power to vote in *Felix Holt* and the social consequences of the first Reform Act of 1832 in *Middlemarch*. Henry James takes up the subject of nineteenth century politics tangentially in *The Bostonians* (1886) and head on in *The Princess Casamassima* (1886). Against the heavily tinged background of anarchist London in the 1880s, the later novel attempts to probe the potential for destruction in a society which stood on the brink of disaster.

On the threshold of the twentieth century we meet another innovator—H. G. Wells—who incorporated in his works certain negative aspects of the Establishment. His *Tono-Bungay* (1909), a sort of bridge between his comic novels and his novels of ideas (such as *The New Machiavelli*), is partly a satire on the uncertainty and waywardness of Capitalism and partly a plea for the necessity of an organised society.

As we step into the twentieth century, we can visibly feel the cracks in the surface complacency of the Victorian bourgeois social structure. Its first indication in the novel appears with the publication of *The Way of All Flesh* (1903), which Walter Allen has called a “delayed action bomb.”
prevailing note of the century, even in its beginning, is quite obviously that of pessimism and tension. Imbibing the spirit of the time, the literature of the period too reflects a mood of uncertainty and a sense of strain. The figure of Conrad looms large—his *Nostromo* has been called "a political novel in the widest sense, the sense in which Aristotle and Marx use the word politics." The novels of Conrad strike the keynote of the century, the note that was to resound in various pitches and combinations though the entire twentieth century.

The crisis which is sensed by Wells, James and Conrad becomes a distinct point of focus for the novelists who were to write in a world defaced by wars and revolutions. The change, as we all know, had been gradual. Rise of industry and democracy in the wake of French Revolution were some of the factors that set its pace, but the process of transformation was accelerated by the Russian Revolution and the World Wars. Whereas the Russian Revolution altered attitudes by giving a new hope to the mankind in the guise of socialism, the World Wars brought about a metamorphosis not only in terms of the history and geography of the world but, more significantly, in its entire sensibility.

A sense of fragmentation, which was as much historical as it was cultural and psychological, overshadowed the experimental texts of the 1920s—poetic expressions as well as fictional works. In the face of a crumbling world order, the artist seemed to retreat into the landscape of mind by way of questioning the moral and aesthetic assumptions of the changing reality. The English novel also imbibed these influences, and in the process got revolutionized in the hands of Joyce and Woolf under the shadow of French and Russian influences. The existent reality submerged beneath a far more complex and elusive inner reality that constituted of thoughts and sensations. The only text that stands out during this time for its political content is Forster’s *A Passage to India*. A mild rendering of politics is evident in Lawrence’s representative novels: partially in the
reflection of his rancorous class-consciousness, but political activity does not go beyond the miners' strike.

It is only during the second quarter of the twentieth century that the “System” that threatened and entrapped the individual once again comes to occupy prime significance. The picture of human situation that emerges from the works of Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, Graham Greene, and Evelyn Waugh is ultimately depressing and disappointing. It is also at this point that we observe a remarkable shift in the intellectual stance. As the desire to retrieve human lives and integrity from amidst the surrounding decadence becomes strong, humanistic tendencies began to surface. It has been rightly observed that as “faith declined in the ‘God of battles’ . . . the vacuum was filled by an evangelizing mission to change society and to foster the democratic millenium.”

Socialism, generally with a strong Marxist overtone, appeared to be the leading vehicle for social, sexual and literary emancipation. The Soviet Communism appeared to be the paradigm of a future society in the blatant contrast that it offered to the totalitarian regimes of Hitler and Mussolini. But just as the Spanish War marked the peak of an era of social commitment, it also provided an opportunity to match the theoretical aspect of Communism with deeds and actions. The golden aura of Communism faded, and a distrust of it followed as soon as the stories of repression in distant Russia acquired a real aspect. (These circumstances are the points of focus in the third and fourth volumes of *Children of Violence*).

George Orwell shared with other European writers this profound disillusionment with Soviet Communism. His major works derive their aesthetic force and a peculiar flavour from the “rot” that had set into an opportunist party line. Whether he experiments with an allegorical genre, or writes in a futuristic vein, his novels, at their core, bear testimony to the nature of modern political turbulence. In an essay of 1947, entitled “Why I Write,” Orwell insisted that “political purpose” alone lent his books life and
meaning. Likewise, Huxley's stimulating presentation of contemporary ideas was a direct outcome of his criticism of social and political order.

In the 1940s there was a strong tendency to use novel for the exposition of general ideas. Three writers, who were also poets, stand out in this kind of novel: Rex Warner, Alex Comfort and Frederick Prokosch. By combining psychology with politics, they tried to touch upon the contemporary problems such as the perils to democratic ideals of freedom as in Rex Warner's *The Professor* (1938), and the problems of the future civilization as in Prokosch's *Storm and Echo* (1949).

The artists' increasing concern for man's right to live in freedom took another aspect and struck a variant but bold note in the English novel of the forties: that of the denouncement of colonialism. This as a political strand has been discussed in the previous section. Yet worth mentioning here in Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939), published only a few years before Greene's *The Heart of the Matter*. It, too, draws its setting from the period when Cary served as an administrator in Nigeria. The fact remains that the actual experience of colonialism has always confronted the creative artist with a question mark.

The writer in the post-war England had to cope with the aftermath of international events on social and intellectual fronts. It was a period of increased materialism, an emerging scepticism about the conclusions of religion and of all ideologies, and a rapid break-down of class distinctions. The liberal idea that our personal lives are free and the democratic ideal of freedom also came to be challenged. All this, combined with the intellectual's "chronic discontent with the existing order"44 made up the conflicting world of the writer's experience during the 1950s and 60s. It is with this world that Lessing concerns herself in the fifth volume of the sequence.

Peter Conrad has adequately captured the prevailing mood of the novel during this period:
The novel describes either Isherwood's mystically solitary single man, or Orwell's politically regimented, mind-controlled Winston Smith. It is trapped in the mutually cancelling opposition over which Jake and Lefty argue in their debate on Marxism in *Under the Net* (1954) . . . .

Defeatism attended by moments of protest, cynicism, earnestness or insight become a recurring refrain during this period, of which we are the inheritors.

There is a distinct change of attitude towards politics among the novelists of this period: the strong sense of commitment to an ideology that might run through a novel as its cohesive force is missing. In this the 1950's and 60s presented a sharp contrast to the temper of the thirties as Frank Whitehead has noted:

> The nineteen-thirties were determinedly political: the nineteen fifties have been no less determinedly anti political—unashamedly apathetic or cynical in regard to all large affiliations, vehemently sceptical of all 'isms.'

The general impression that one gets by much writing of this period is of a turning away from urgent and living contemporary issues or a retreat into triviality or unreality on the part of the novelists. C.P. Snow is perhaps the only novelist of the period who consistently sets out to explore all important public issues. His overriding interest lies in the analysis of the centres of power in the post-war English society, in both their public and private manifestations. This thematic concern first came into sharp focus in *The Masters* (1951), the third of *Strangers and Brothers* sequence.

The works of the writers such as Wyndham Lewis, Kingsley Amis, John Wain, John Braine and Alan Sillitoe do give a glimpse of the twentieth century man and his predicament as a member of mass civilization, but they fail to convey a composite picture of human situation. The reason could be that the international scene remains as troubled as ever, and the perpetually going on disputes have acquired the aspect of a crazy unreality. Nevertheless, a genuine intolerance of humbug, a distrust of the "Establishment" and irreverence towards all traditionally accepted institutions remain the high points of their writings. This particular tone of
their fiction caused them to be grouped as “The Angry Young Men.” Lessing
too, for her direct and unrestrained analysis of the English prejudices, has
been sometimes categorized with them; though, in the long run, any such
categorization proves delimiting and unproductive.

Also, more than the protest element, it is the feeling of being
displaced persons that most of them share. The inability of society and state
to offer real political ideal and meaningful social and personal values is
what brings in the note of protest. The problem with most of these writers is
that their treatment of politics remains superficial; it does not become a
potential dimension to analyse the core of a problematic situation. Politics is
not perceived by them as a manifestation of some great theme, not even of
protest or displacement in the manner it becomes a medium for Doris
Lessing to manifest contemporary social and spiritual dilemmas.

This overview of the progress of the novel through a chunk of history
does not in any way claim to be an adequate summary of the periods. The
intention is only to project, against cursorily sketched background, those
particular works which distinctly reveal some shade of politics in them. In
that too there may have been some regrettable omissions. Partly it may be
attributed to the limited scope of our project, and partly because the
purpose has been to situate Doris Lessing within the English tradition of
those novels which in some way or the other treat politics as one of the
form-lending elements.

Remarkably few writers, whose adult consciousness was formed in
the pre-atomic era, have made any serious attempt to re-examine and re-
define their position in the light of post-atomic realities and sentiments.
Doris Lessing is one of them, and her novel sequence under study is an
attempt towards that quest. Politics in terms of the novel needs to be
understood as a mode of reference to relations among power, moral ideas
and social institutions. It is at this plane that politics works in Silone’s
Bread and Wine, Conrad’s Nostromo, James’ The Princess Casamassima as
it does in Lessing’s Children of Violence.
Doris Lessing: A Perspective

Lessing is one of those post-war writers whose works have evoked a widely variegated response: she stimulates, illuminates, mystifies—and even annoys. Her smooth reconciliation of the psychological and the political, her penetrating insights into the dissolution of society and the disintegration of relationships, her passionate involvement with the problems of modern woman—all this against the backdrop of highly charged political atmosphere has lent a peculiarly disturbing, sometimes unsavoury but almost always pungent, flavour to her writings.

Her art defies categorization of any kind, partly due to her long colonial experience. Alienated from her own culture, her creative consciousness has imbibed all the political and social dilemmas of South Africa in the first half of the twentieth century. Lessing's novels stand apart not only in the matter of content but very often in that of form as well. Whether she is writing in the realistic mode or experimenting with allegorical mode, her novels are a quest for "objective correlatives" to explicate the trials and traumas to which human spirit has been subjected in the modern era. They are creative searchings which allow her to make a unique investigation into phenomena which go far beyond the bounds of individual life experience. Her writings, thus, become a multifaceted commentary on the conflicting times, simultaneously revealing her acute perception of the relationship between the individual and the collective. Her novelistic intent is to carve out a new life from antithetical forces: the contraries of "love, hate, black, white, good, bad, man and woman" (FGC,562).

Artistic assimilation of concrete historical reality defines artistic cognition and aesthetic convictions of an individual writer. Doris Lessing's art also reveals a profound understanding of social and historical crises, as they can be embodied in fiction without indulging in reductionism. Ever since the publication of her first novel, The Grass is Singing (1950), her commitment to social reality has been total and all inclusive. In spite of
her own radicalism and experience as an “old red”, Lessing avoids the narrowing constraints of “commitment” as mere political affiliations, and nowhere does she allow its political polyvalence to wane. Due to a consistent and concentrated concern for social issues in her novels, Lessing has been regarded as one belonging to the creative lineage of such humanist writers as George Eliot and D. H. Lawrence. There is, however, a conspicuous point of departure: political ideas play a dominant role in her novels, and in many of them political milieu is the dominant setting.

Political complexity of Doris Lessing’s art is a crucial yet an inadequately studied aspect: much more emphasis being laid on the theme of the disintegration of the self or the feminist readings of her novels. Not that those are any the less substantive aspects, yet her concern with socialism as Zeitgeist, and her penetrating analyses of people’s inability to accommodate themselves to a regime of thought laid down by their predecessors are seminal to the understanding of her art. That she regards it essential to capture the intellectual and moral climate of the mid-century has been affirmed in the preface to The Golden Notebook (1962). To get the essence of the times, she says, a novel

would have to be set among socialists and Marxists, because it has been inside the various chapters of socialism that the great debates of our times have gone on; the movements, the wars, the revolutions, have been seen by their participants as movements of various kinds of socialism, or Marxism, in advance, containment, or retreat (11).

Her initial creative impulse is to capture “all that complexity” (GN, 14), “the vigour and conflict of ideas in action” (GN, 11), and to evolve something true and credible from an experience which must essentially be, as all experiences are—so rough and apparently formless and unshaped. Anna’s retort in The Golden Notebook provides a key to the aesthetic that informs the entire Lessing canon: “If Marxism means anything, it means that a little novel about the emotions should reflect ‘What’s real’ since the emotions are a function and a product of a society” (61).
Critics have been inclined to look upon *Children of Violence* novel sequence as unsparing recording of Martha’s various problems—political, social and psychological—in the mid twentieth century. Written over a period between 1950 and 1969, the time-scale covered from *Martha Quest* to *The Four-Gated City* is when Europe in particular and mankind in general was passing through one of its most cataclysmic phases: that of immediately before, during and after the Second World War. It was the time when social as well as political contradictions were sharper, the consciousness of them more acute and the sensibilities more susceptible to predominant political ideas. Equally vital is the choice of locale: first four of the series are set in Rodesia before independence, and the fifth, *The Four-Gated City*, in war-wrecked London. This choice of a particular time and place variously expresses a specific point of view. In Lessing’s case where it enables her to create the ambience of the times, it also becomes a powerful device to comprehend current prejudices and choices as well as the ensuing coming apart of the world.

It is with the wider implications of politics that Lessing is concerned with—“politics as a distinctive mode of social existence,” as Howe says; or which Raymond Williams defines as “a politics which is based on understanding of the main lines of force in a society and a choice of the conflict between them.” When viewed from this angle Lessing’s novel-sequence becomes a fictional correlative of classic sociology, “exhibiting a profound concern with the perturbing dynamics of an abstract entity—society.” But unlike sociology, it transforms that entity into flesh and blood. By portraying the impact of politics on people at all levels of society, her major novels acquire a universality which distinguishes them from the parliamentary novels of Trollope and Disraeli. Yet politics remains only one of the many flavours in Doris Lessing’s novels; it is not all-consuming or all-pervasive element as in André Malraux’s novels though both share an interest in politics in their personal lives.
Within this broad parameter various dimensions of man-politics equation emerge in *Children of Violence* sequence. One discovers that all the disparities in colonial set-up acquire a sharp edge in *Martha Quest*. The problem of racial discrimination, the dichotomies prevailing among the European communities living in South Africa—their mutual antipathies and snobberies—get pointedly highlighted. Lessing, in her characteristic forthright style, analyses the predicament of the white man for whom South Africa has been both a refuge and a burden. In fact, the theme of the relationship between the privileged, dominant class and the passive, dominated class recurs consistently in the first four volumes, more so in *Martha Quest* and *A Proper Marriage*. The latter is as much a study into the relationship between sexual politics and the state of civilization.

The point of emphasis shifts in *A Ripple from the Storm* and *Landlocked* in which we get the ideological “feel” of the mid-century. The multidimensional aspect of communism—its various interpretations—are probed deeply, and the ideological activity is pushed to the foreground. *Landlocked* concentrates more on the disenchantment that follows as a natural sequel when ideology gets fragmented into various cross-currents after having been so thoroughly absorbed as to be finished as a force. The city in *The Four-Gated City* is a bomb-scarred London, totally antithetical to the idyllic city of Martha’s epiphanies. The culture and civilization it stands for has also been scarred for ever after the political upheavals that came in the wake of World Ward II. The entire sordidness of modern politics, its intrigues, its inhuman belittling tactics and its throttling impact on arts and literature are some of the resounding notes in *The Four-Gated City*. True to the feelings voiced by Anna, this last of the sequence has as its subject matter what Lessing in *The Golden Notebook* calls “the fragmented society, the fragmented consciousness” (*GN*,79).

Lessing has also handled quite subtly, throughout all the five volumes, the infinitely complex network of “micro-powers,” of power relations that percolate through every aspect of social life. Even the novels
of *Canopus in Argos: Archives* series are not an escape from the themes of the realistic novels. Colonialism is the subject of *The Sirian Experiment*. *The Marriage Between Zones Three, Four and Five* is also a political novel with utopian tendencies. In her travelogue, *The Wind Blows Away Our Words*, Lessing looks beyond the much advertised heroism of Muhjahadin, and tries to highlight the problem of the Afghan militancy and the apathetic attitude of the entire West. Due to this vast canvas of hers and her equally brilliant brush strokes, David Malcolm has called her “the contentious, protean, and cosmopolitan figure.”

That Lessing’s plots and characters derive their sustaining force from politics cannot be denied. *Children of Violence* makes us aware of the dangers lurking beneath “the vast smug surface” of the world. Humanity, freedom, choice turn out to be elusive propositions. Without even being aware of it, the individual is “moulded” and “patterned” to fit into the narrow and particular needs of a system. Herein lies the greatest threat to our situation: we, like Martha, have been “bred . . . and reared on violence” (*LL*, 242).

Lessing’s works have been censured for lack of clarity and excessive experimentation. Paul West especially levies his criticism on her for excluding the subjective and indulging in excessive “manipulation” which effects the credibility of her characters. At its best, however, her writing is lucid and realistic, and her sensitivity and spiritual insights have made her one of the most important English novelists of the century. For her, criticism is a sign that “the book is alive and potent and fructifying” (*GN*, preface 22); the mystery of its inner shape and pattern, therefore, must never be completely unravelled.

Politics while providing an underlying ideology to her work, also imparts an interesting aspect to her situation as a writer. She symbolises that “transcendental homelessness” which Lukács relates with the problematic relations between the individual and the world. Lessing remains an exile not only in the main tradition of the English novel but as a
writer too, by virtue of her colonial background—an attribute that she shares with Jean Rhys and Margaret Stead. While in South Africa she has to bear the burden of being a white, her status is essentially that of a bemused colonial in London, the cultural centre.

But in the tradition of South African literature she is very much at home although these days one can hear this humane note only in her short stories. Her name still figures prominently and authentically among Plomer, Alan Paton, Peter Abrahams, Nadine Gordimer and others. With Gordimer she shares all the contradictions of growing up in South Africa but their art reflects different political choices and aesthetic goals. Political arguments are an essential part of Lessing's canon while Gordimer is more concerned with the human results of apartheid. She arraigns apartheid in equally powerful fiction without allowing ideas to predominate over feelings. In Lessing, on the other hand, this blending of ideas with fiction is what imparts all the force and complexity to her novels and stories, and lends that razor-edge quality to Children of Violence. Since we are the prisoners of our experience, so South Africa unavoidably becomes the main arena where Doris Lessing's human values initially formulate and integrate with political concerns. It, therefore, seems appropriate to explore South African aspect as a starting point for investigating the interconnection of politics and literature in Children of Violence.


9. When elaborated, these systems are the system of decision, the system of communication and learning, the system of maintenance and the system of generation and nurture. For further details see Raymond Williams, Interviews with New Left Review, *Politics and Letters* (1979; London: Verso, 1981) 136-149.


33. Rushdie, Bourne and Herman 55.


35. David Caute. qtd. in Colmer 17.

36. Alter 40.

37. Alter 42.

38. Fox 42.


41. Some Consequences of this revolt were evident in Dada and Surrealism, and in the development of German expressionism. By this time Freud had already popularised his theories of psychoanalysis, and Jungian psychology was also in the air.

42. A change that is clearly visible in the works of the Auden generation, particularly in poetry which was, by and large, political in its message and purpose.


