CHAPTER – III

CONTEXTUALIZING POLITICS

“There is no such thing as genuinely non-political literature”. (Orwell, George 373).

The impact of political events on Indian literature is quite significant. Indian novels in English based on political themes came into vogue in the late nineteenth century and the early part of the twentieth century. The Indian novelists in English of the period were primarily concerned with the changing political scene and the upsurge of the freedom movement, as Meenakshi Mukherjee puts it, “The independence movement in India was not merely a political struggle but an all-pervasive national experience for all Indians in the nineteen-twenties and thirties” (34). Hence, Indian freedom movement perhaps was nothing but a political movement in India which provided abundant source of themes for the Indian English novelists. The first five decades of the twentieth century registered drastic changes in the social, political, economic and cultural life of Indian people due to the introduction of English education. As the sensitive mind of a writer cannot but avoid respond to the changes he/she captured it in their works and this helped in creating political awareness as well as brought Indian people together. The novelists captured the impact of politics, hopes, fears and angst of the people of the period.

‘Man is a social animal’, defines Aristotle in his Poetics, and all the socio-political movements invariably affect man in his everyday life directly or indirectly. Therefore, the subject of a novel is man and society, and hence, politics is inextricably related to the upheavals and tribulations of the society. Some novelists used political events as major themes while others have used it as a backdrop in their personal
narratives. However, it is interesting to note that the political themes in Indian English novels acquire almost a central place and have found ample space in the novelist’s critical endeavours.

The current chapter *Contextualizing Politics* attempts to examine various forms of politics such as power politics, caste politics, class politics, vote-bank politics, nexus between politician and violence, political violence and the communal/religious politics in India and the resultant ethnic violence which is posing a great threat to the secular fabric of the country. It also focuses on how politics and violence are invariably part of Indian society today. The novels that deal with the theme of politics are Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* (2001), Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot: A Novel* (2006), and Githa Hariham’s *In Times of Siege* (2008). Before the novels are taken up for a close analysis, concepts like politics, religion, secularism, democracy, and values of politics will be discussed in detail. A bird’s eye view of the socio-political history of India is also offered in the chapter to have a better understanding of these concepts.

The word ‘politics’ has undergone remarkable conceptual modifications of late. Conventional notion of politics is located in the public sphere- the activities that are related to the affairs of the state government and public bodies. Hence, political ideology is a highly complex set of beliefs, values and practices. It is an action-oriented system of thought for social change and improvement. As a concept, ‘politics’ is a blanket term that demands lot of interpretations. *The Oxford Advanced Learner’s English Dictionary* describes, “Politics is the activities involved in getting and using power in public life, and being able to influence decisions that affect a country or a society”. Any attempt to define a political novel will be problematic since it does not represent a distinct form from that
of novel. A writer who writes a novel based on political theme may find it difficult to put to life both art and politics in a watertight compartment. The political novel is no more than a fictitious political narrative, about imaginary politicians, rather it is a genre closely connected with the social conditions and its values. Hence, political novel can be viewed as a social history or a chronicle of a country.

The political novel is a direct descendant of the nineteenth century social novel that attempted to give a realistic portrayal of the contemporary social life of the times. Many political thinkers have defined political novel in their own way. Morris Edmund Speare in his pioneering work, *The Political novel: Its development in England and America* (1924) elucidates Political novel as:

>a work prose fiction that leans rather to ‘ideas’ than to ‘emotions’: which deals with the machinery of law making or with a theory about public conduct than with the merits of any given piece of legislation and where the main purpose of the writer is partly propagation, public reform, or expositions of the lives of personages who maintain government, or of the forces which constitute government. (IX).

Perhaps Edmund Speare is one of the earliest critics who attempted to define the political novel. According to him, political novel is the work of prose, and a fiction that deals with only ‘ideas’ rather than ‘emotions’. There is no room for emotions since the issues are related to public conduct, intellect and to legislation. The administrative machinery of the country involves in making a legislation to maintain the law and order
situation of the state or a country. George Orwell, another significant writer of the twentieth century differentiates politics and political novelists:

The politicians and artists do not well go together. The goal of a politician is always limited, partial, short-term, over simplified. It has to be, to have any hope of realization. As a principle of action, it cannot afford to consider its own imperfections and the possible virtues of its opponents. It cannot afford to dwell on the pathos and the tragedy of all human endeavors. In short, it must exclude the very things that are valuable” (56).

George Orwell too is critical in his views on politics and politicians. He is of the view that writing is theoretical and politics is practical. Interestingly, politicians and novelists contradict each other as their priorities and goals are different. The goal of a politician is narrow, limited and shortsighted one because he always looks forward to the next election, how to win so as to survive. It is the reality of politics. It is the nature of the politician that he cannot take the virtues of his opponents. Whereas the novelist’s role is like that of a teacher, operating on ideologies, which in fact corrects the political system, society, and explicates politics.

The most significant and influential study on political fiction in the twentieth century is Irving Howe’s *Politics and the Novel* (1957). He opines that, “a political novel is one in which political ideas play a dominant role or in which the political milieu is the dominant setting” (17). Howe avoids the rigid classification of the political novels and considers “the novel in which politics plays a vital role” (17). He argues that the political novel emphasizes on the writer’s selection of the ‘subject’ or his attitude towards politics;
it emphasizes its relation between political ideas and the experiences of the characters who involve in politics. Howe means that politics increasingly affects human behavior and feelings. He is also aware of the great challenges the political novelist has to face while recording the major political events. Howe continues his argument on political novelist thus:

… to the degree that he is really novelist, a man seized by the passion to represent and to give order to experience, he must drive the politics of or behind his novel into a complex relation with the kinds of experience that resist reduction to formula and this once done, supreme difficulty though it is, transforms his ideas astonishingly (21-22).

The novelist’s task is always to explore the relation between theory and experience, between the ideology and practice that has been preconceived and the web of feelings and relationships he is trying to present. He articulates important political issues through several modes of representation such as real incidents (current political issues/events), memoirs, reminiscences, chronicles, documentaries, official records, fables, allegories, satires and novels of the great events that constitute or represent a historical epoch. It would be interesting to see how the political novel is different from that of a historical novel. In short, the political novel is a revised or modified version of historical novel.

What is contemporary is political, what is past is historical. A political interpretation of events during a novelist’s life time can be considered interpretative and predictive, through particular projections may or may
not come true. On the other hand, a historical interpretation is more likely to be a retrospection or justification of events that have taken place” (Bhatnagar 37).

It is to be noted that, the remote past events offer ‘historical’ presentation. The treatment given to the events and persons of the 1930s and the later period in the works of Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Throor and Githa Hariharan could therefore be termed as a political chronicle. The major events of this span of time can be expected to recur as images and dominate as emotions. The political novel has to rise above history and memoirs to be a successful novel. Every political novel in a sense is an imaginative and ideological construction.

Politics has never been a serious concern for Indians till the arrival of the British on the Indian soil unlike China, Greece and Arabia. Rather, there was positively a political orientation inherited in the traditional ethos of Indian society. For example, Kautilya’s Arthasastra, the first ever written treatise on politics, is used in a wider context that includes economic and politics, society, morals, ethics and so forth, in total the political ideologies of the period. People of the time have thought that, the economic system was the root cause of all evils and that could be corrected only by collective action.

The Indian novel in English and the political awakening took shape simultaneously in the second half of the nineteenth century. As the English education and the anti-imperial movement spread, political awakening became an acute concern with people, which manifested itself as national consciousness. Indeed, this sense of
commitment to national awakening was a significant factor that made the early novelists to mould the genre of political novel. The writers who wrote in regional languages were exposed to the English language, Western thoughts and Western novels. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore in Begali, Govardhanam Tripathi in Gujrati, Chandu Menon in Malayalam, Galaganatha in Kannada and others deeply influenced the Indian mass through their writings. Priyamvada Gopal observes:

By the last decades of the nineteenth century, in the wake of wide-spread famines and economic degradation, resentment and localized criticism of British rule were transforming themselves into a more well-defined nationalism, one that sought to unite various provincial groups and organizations under a large all-India umbrella (31).

From the above lines, it is quite apparent that the national consciousness was inculcated in the early phase of Indian novels in English. Quite a few Indian novelists in English have set their narratives in the recent political and historical milieu and weave significant political happenings therein. Amitav Ghosh goes back to the politics of colonial period from the present perspective whereas Shashi Tharoor and Githa Hariharan are keen on presenting the burning issues of our present political system. Their very act of narrating important events in such a background is an act of inculcating political awakening. They consciously choose to set their narratives in the present rather than in the distant past. Thus, they act like political chroniclers. Keeping in mind, Bankim Chandra’s Anandamath (1882) an inspiring novel and its poem Bande Matharam or ‘Worship the Motherland’ (tells about unity in diversity of the nation) included in the
novel became India’s ‘National Song’. The novel was translated into many Indian languages to create national consciousness among the Indians.

The British contributed much to the political awakening among the Indians. Their introduction of English education exposed Indians to the English Constitution, liberal, democratic, political ideologies and the idea of freedom. These ideologies awakened Indian educated elites who disseminated this political consciousness during the freedom movement. The early political and religious leaders like, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore, Balgangaadhar Tilak, Lajpat Roy, Bipin Chandra Pal, Swamy Dayananda Saraswathi, Swamy Vivekananda, R.C. Dutt, Arabindo Ghosh and others were exposed to English education and some who studied in the West influenced Indian mass politically through several political movements. This gave Indians new ideas against the colonial experience, to give shape and formulate their vague ideas into clarity for their future course of action. “The tangible gain of this phase of political consciousness was the education of the people in modern politics, the awakening of nationalist ideas and the creation of unified public opinion on political questions” (Bhatnagar 13). The Indian mass who involved in these movements became politically conscious.

The early Indian writers have contributed a lot in creating a political awakening wrote novels based on important political and historical events. Most of such novels that are considered as part of Indian writing are period pieces that deal with the workings/politics of the British Raj. They are indigenous versions of the colonial nostalgia showing little sign of expanding beyond history, to work towards relating contemporaneity to antiquity. Thus, the freedom movement as well as other progressive
movements gave rise to a good number of literary talents who made attempts at fictional experiments. Although the movement did not produce a good number of politicians and political novelists, it produced political thinkers like, Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, M.N. Roy, Jayaprakash Narayan, Ram Manohar Lohia, Ved Mehta, D.D Kosambi and others.

Indian novel in English originated and developed under the British rule in India. As a colonized country with a long history of subjugation by foreign rule, nation and nationalism become a major preoccupation of the early Indian writers. Political consciousness and nationalism permeated every section of Indian society during the freedom struggle and provided impetus to the writers for their creative endeavours. Literature written during this period reflected the angry outbursts against the political and economic exploitation of foreign dominance. As a result, political motif has been prominent in Indian English novel right from its origin. M.K. Naik finds a close affinity between the freedom struggle and the rise of the Indian English novels. He says; “The Indian novel in English was born before independence and naturally the politics of the freedom struggle plays an important part in it.” (117). The novelists, who wrote novels in English at an early stage based on political themes, documented what was happening around them- the society, economic exploitation, the political subjugation, the plight of the poor and the downtrodden, political movements and so on. Most of the novelists of the time “deal directly with the national experience as the central theme, and novels that use this experience as the background to a personal narrative” (Meenakshi 36).

Political novel, more than any other genre of literature is formed and shaped by the environment of its creation. Therefore, Politics is to be viewed and evaluated against
the background of its major historical events, cultural forces and political ideologies. In other words, a political novel cannot be viewed in isolation, as it is an autonomous body. Viewed thus, the relationship between the text and its historical context, a political novel thus becomes dynamic so much so that an understanding of the novel requires an understanding of its context. Therefore, a proper evaluation of a political novel demands an investigation of its background in which it is written. It is true that, the sensibility of the novelist is shaped by the political happenings of the period. At the same time, one has to keep in mind the fact and pose questions such as, has any of the novelists risen above the level of documenting and weaved the events artistically? Does it reflect the essential human conditions during that period of historical and political upheavals? Does the writer remain a mere chronicler? How many writers of the period have given an objective picture of what has happened at that time? Furthermore, how the contemporary political events affect the novelists and their way of thinking? Have these novelists documented a credible picture of the political events and the people involved in the events of the period? What is their understanding and reaction or response to the common man’s involvement in the events? In addition to this, what are the novelists’ intentions or preoccupations in depicting important events in their novels? These factors will be the primary concern of this chapter.

Political novel, like historical novel, is an offshoot of the Indian nationalism. As a result, the early Indian English novels were based either on political themes or on historical themes, if not both. The political novel found expression of a newly awakened feeling during freedom movement in the second half of the nineteenth century. The novelists used this fictional mode, turned it into a feasible medium of exploring the
political experiences, and incorporated it with literary imagination. Such early attempts were made by writers like, Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Sushee Chunder Dutt, Romesh Chunder Dutt, Lal Behari Day, Behramji M. Malabari, Rajam Aiyar and others. It is also to be noted that, all these writers are from Bengal, where the literary renaissance took birth. These writers wrote novels based on political themes with the intention of creating a political awakening and foster the national pride among the Indians. The pioneering figures in Indian novels in English in the early period of the twentieth century are Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and R.K Narayan and their efforts gave the Indian fiction international status and universal recognition. Walsh even considers them as representative novelists or trendsetters.

Apart from the ‘Big Three’, Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan and Raja Rao, the post independence Indian novelists like, Nayantara Shagal, K.A. Abbas, Kamala Markandeya, Kushwanth Singh, Arun Joshi, Ruth Prewar Jabwala and others also focused on the contemporary politics, social as well as economic exploitation. They captured the tragic partition of the Indian subcontinent and the disillusionment about the functioning of democratic institutions, the qualities of political leaders and the gradual erosion or decline of moral and ethical values in the public life have became the major subject matters. They faithfully mirror the senseless fury of communal horror, the corruption in the bureaucracy and in politics, the inhumanity of the communist theoreticians, the passionate outbursts of the religious fanatics and so on. The novels also effectively present the trauma of an independent India, facing external aggression and the predicament of characters within the confines of stifling ideologies.
The Indian novelists of nineteen eighties onwards began to lay claim to History/Politics predominantly through the novel form. For constructing a national history, respecting certain secular ideologies, to maintain peace and fraternity among the different religious/ethnic groups and to safeguard national unity and integrity free from colonial hegemony, is a major preoccupation of the writers of this period. Secularism is one of the fundamental components of Indian postcolonial identity, as it became a national policy adopted by Jawaharlal Nehru. In this historical and political context, these novels draw on the Gandhian and Nehruvian model of secularism, pluralist democracy and multicultural society to contest the decline of the secular ideology in the public sphere that led to political corruption, corruption in bureaucracy, nepotism, casteism, religion, region and communal violence and so on. Indeed, these issues are the major concerns of this thesis. The novels that are discussed in this chapter are ‘political’ in the sense that they respond to specific moments of India’s historical, political, and cultural contexts.

Political fiction explores the convergence of politics and human experiences, attempting an interpenetration of personal views and political ideologies. The political situation of Post-Independence India proved to be a fertile ground for the blossoming of a number of literary geniuses. The novels taken up for study in this chapter Contextualizing Politics are, Amitav Ghosh’s The Glass Palace (2001), Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Novel (2006), and Githa Harihara’s In Times of Siege (2008). Published between 2000 and 2009, these novels deal with contemporary Indian politics and are specific responses to the political system of the times. A close reading of these novels reveal a common thread– the political situation to their creative sensitivity in the fictionalization of the
contemporary Indian politics. These writers attempt to stimulate the stereotyped Indian English novel with their shocking repudiation of existing paradigms of novel writing. These novels represent a distinct form of political imagination attuned to the paradoxes of living under a totalitarian system. Each writer employs his own distinct technique in delineating the issues relating to politics of Indian subcontinent during and after pre- and post-colonial period more acutely.

Amitav Ghosh’s *The Glass Palace* exposes the British colonial politics showing how the colonizers plundered the wealth in India, Malaysia and Burma. Ghosh captures how the colonizers mercilessly overthrow the Royal family in Burma as they did the same in India, and exploit the natives for the natural resources like teak, petroleum and cheap labours. On the other hand, Shashi Tharoor’s, *Riot: A novel* explores how the sectarian violence explodes in the wake of Ram janmabhoomi issue and how the politicians and religious leaders politicize and mix religion with politics for the sake of votes. The novel also depicts the role of bureaucracy in such issues. Interestingly, Githa Harihara’s *In Times of Siege* deftly criticizes the growing Hindu fundamentalism, and an alternative national ideology, *Hindutva*, which is based on the supremacy of Hindu religion and culture. How Hinduism is trying to get entry into the University milieu and establish its identity in the academic circles and how the place of higher learning is getting politicized is deftly dealt by Githa Harihara. These novels mark a significant period in the history of the Indian polity causing the breakdown of the Indian democratic secular consensus or ideologies after the independence. The breakdown of these ideologies began with the partition of the Indian sub-continent into India and Pakistan in 1947. At the same time there are several organizations that belonged to different
religious, political and cultural identities operating and posing threat to the national integrity of India. The present chapter attempts to discuss these vital/crucial issues with reference to the novels mentioned above.

Early novels based on political themes are A Journal of 48 Hours in the year 1935 (1835) by Kylas Cunder Dutt and The Republic of Orissa (1845) by Soshee Chunder Dutt. The former chronicles a revolt against the British rule by the Sepoys and the latter is about the establishment of a democratic Republic in Orissa. However, these two works were not treated as novels but as short stories. The Other novels written based on the similar themes are, Govinda Samanta (1874) by Lal Bihari Dey, Shunkur: A Tale of the Mutiny of 1857 (1885), Young Zameendar (1885) by Sooche Chunder Dutt, The Prince of Destiny (1909) by S.K. Ghosh, Hindupore (1909) by S. M. Mitra, Murugan the Tiller (1927) and Kandan the Patriot (1932) by K.S. Venkataramani, Kanthapura (1938) by Raja Rao, and R.K. Narayan’s Waiting for Mahatma (1955) which in fact were the best known early political novels. Nevertheless, these works indicate how deeply the genre of the political novel rooted in Indian English fiction. Even Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, Amir Ali, K. A. Abbas, Kamala Markendeya, Nayantara Shagal, Kushwant Singh, Babhani Bhattacharya, Arun Joshi and others wrote remarkable novels based on the political themes.

The French Revolution and its Napoleonic aftermath, the American Civil War and the subsequent reorganization of the European countries, the Third Reich in Germany and its repercussions have provided novelists with the necessary impetus for writing novels. The major political novels of the world are, Fyodor Dostoevsky’s The Possessed (1871), Charles Dicken’s A Tale of Two Cities (1859), Joseph Conrad’s Nostromo (1904), Andre
Malraux’s *Man’s Fate* (1933), Albert Camus’s *The Plague* (1947), and George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1949), *Animal Farm* (1945) and so on based on significant political turmoil of the times. These novels come under the category of political fiction. Perhaps the Indian English novelists who read novels based on political issues might have drawn inspiration from these novels.

Post-independence novels deal with the changing political situations and offer a political commentary on the volatile (unpredictable) events that made up India’s politics. The country’s major problems like economic development, social problems, unemployment, religious intolerance, communal clashes, exploitation and other issues remain almost ignored by majority of the writers of the time. A political novelist, who is sensitive to such issues and committed to ideologies, looks into it and represents the same in his novels. At the same time, a novelist has to face more risks than the other writers do while representing such sensitive issues as communal, religious, racial, regional, cultural, historical, political and so on. Sometimes it may not be possible for the novelist to take any stand firmly on such issues. The political novel generates such intense tension that the ideas it appropriates dissolve into its movement and get fused with the emotions of its characters. Some sensitive writers of the time, to evade such controversies and complications began to use in their fictions literary devises like allegory, fable, satire, magic realism, memoir, newspaper report, diaries, etc. to convey their ideas and ideologies to their readers.

Quite a few Indian English novelists in the twenty first century have set their narratives in the recent political and historical milieu, using significant political happenings and weaving fiction out of it. They also discuss both the personal
predicaments and the political plight of the people. The selected novels of Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor and Githa Hariharan grapple with the political realities of the time. The very act of weaving a narrative in such a background is an act of creating political awareness.

A fresh crop of writers emerged after the 1980s, on the Indian literary scene called- the ‘Rushdian generation’. Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Vikram Seeth, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Amit Chaudhry, Mujkul Keshavan, Vikram Chandra, Forook Dhondey, Jaishree Misra, Githa Hariharan, Shashi Deshpande, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai and others who adopted diverse themes, techniques and styles of narration with a more confident approach in their novels. They shook off all conventional canons of fiction and developed a new fictional pattern which shocked the sensibility and revealed the complexity in their treatment of history and politics. Moving away from the descriptive style of writing and voicing their inner thoughts the novelists gradually resort to stylistic innovations and multiple perspectives. Thus, they experimented with new strategies of demystification since the romance with realism nearing was its end. These novelists opt for a factual background only with a view to find an order in the world of politics. Sensitive to the human predicaments, they present the political happenings in a wider human framework.

Indian English novelists candidly documented the functioning of democratic institutions, the quality and the character of the new political leaders, the deterioration of moral and ethical values in their novels. In the postcolonial novels, the political themes became multifarious, especially the most important events in the post-independence Indian political scene like, the declaration of Emergency in 1975, Sikh Riots in 1984,
Babri Masjid and Rama Janmabhoomi issue in 1992, Godhra incidents 2002 and others found expression in the novels of the twenty-first century. The novelists began to articulate those complex political and emotional experiences by adding imaginative characters with the real events, reconstructed significant events to create political awakening among the people. They consciously or unconsciously express their ideologies, presenting and analyzing the existing political conditions in their works.

Andrew Heywood in his remarkable work *Political Ideologies* remarks:

> Ideologies play a crucial role in either upholding the prevailing power structure by portraying it as fair, natural, rightful or whatever or in weakening or challenging it by highlighting its inequalities or injustices and drawing attention to the attractions of alternative power structures (16).

Heywood intends to say that the novelist who writes basing on political themes stands in an ideal position. He plays a crucial role while writing about politics and political personalities. Because he assumes the role of a teacher or a reformer who attempts to rectify the politics and politicians excesses.


Amitav Ghosh (1956) is a prolific writer and a very significant literary personality after Salman Rushdie in Indian English literary scene. studied at Doon School in Dehra Dun, got higher education at St. Stephan’s College New Delhi, and obtained his M.A., Degree in Socialanthropology from the University of Delhi in 1978. He worked as a Journalist for *The Indian Express* in Delhi for some time and went to University of
Virginia as a visiting professor. Ghosh’s interesting areas of writing are Anthropology, History, Politics, Cultural collisions, Subaltern and so on. Like other writers, Ghosh does not stick to a particular theme or ‘isms’ and does not romanticize anything in his works. His novels deal with pre and post-colonial anxieties such as dislocation, identity, nation, border, neo-colonialism, subaltern problems and so forth. His novels are well crafted, painstakingly researched and compellingly written. Being a student of History, all his novels reflect historic sensibility and are written predominantly from a historic perceptive. He takes up an historical event, dwells upon it from different perspectives to throw light on the impact of history on the individuals’ lives, families and on the nation. In one of his interviews with Hawley Ghosh remarks “my essential interest is in people and their lives, histories and predicaments” (Hawley 7).

*The Glass Palace* is written against the colonial backdrop. It is a critical re-visiting of the British colonial period. Ghosh challenges the imperialist epistemology which always works widely through the Western consciousness. *The Glass Palace* was shortlisted for Commonwealth award but Ghosh withdraws his book from the committee that has recommended it for the award because such awards continue to abet the very institutions (particularly the British Empire). He asserts that, “The issue of how the past is to be remembered lies in the heart of *The Glass Palace*. I feel that I would be betraying the spirit of my book if I were to allow it to be incorporated within that particular memorialization of Empire that passed under the rubric of the Commonwealth” (Ghosh, PEN 35-36). Such is the integrity and commitment of Amitav Ghosh.
In an interview with Sheela Reddy in 2012 Ghosh observes:

It is true that anyone who looks into Indian history must necessarily be amazed by how little is actually known about it. And I don’t just mean the history of subaltern groups, but even of dissenting elites (for example the story of the founders of the Indian National Army is unknown to most Indians). As for the history of the Indian presence in Burma, is completely unknown- there is very little written about it. In this sense, I felt I was bearing a double burden when I was writing *The Glass Palace*. When an American writes a historical novel, he or she can generally rely on the historians to have done research. I don’t have this luxury available to me. I had to do much of the primary research while also telling a story (CIWE).

*The Glass Palace* is a semi-autobiographical novel based on the experiences of Ghosh’s uncle, Jagat Chandra Dutta, who was a timber merchant in Burma. Ghosh says that his father’s family had lived in Burma for several generations. “My family’s history has undoubtedly played a large part in opening my eyes to these events for my family was divided not only by the partition of India and Pakistan, but also by the Japanese conquest of Burma in 1942” (Hawley 114). The novel attempts to document the impact of historical events on families and individuals during the British colonial period. Ghosh in a way was attracted towards Burma emotionally because his father lived for some years there. This emotional attachment of Ghosh motivated him to write this novel.

Ghosh attempts to present a mirror image of the political and historical schisms, dichotomies and bloody events caused by varied conflicts that took place in the South-
Asian sub-continent during the colonial period. To present these conflicts he breaks away from many barriers of conventional methods of presenting the historical and political happenings particularly in Burma and generally in India and Malaysia. Ghosh fills this novel with different and interesting themes set against a fascinating historical backdrop. Thus, he deconstructs national, geographic, political, cultural and imaginary boundaries and stresses more on the role of the individual in a broad sweep of political and historical events, and refutes the dubious nature of borders, whether they are between nations or peoples, geographic or political. For him, borders and boundaries are just ‘shadow lines’. *The Glass Palace* brings out how colonialists use the political strategies such as physical usurpation of territories through militaristic and in the name of civilizational imperialism for the colonization of the minds of their subjects. The material and ideological instruments go a long way in subjugating the races. *The Glass Palace* can be studied as a postcolonial text as it exposes the colonial design of the British Empire. It criticizes the British rule which colonized the native minds by re-framing the existing structures of human knowledge into East-West binaries. In this process, Ghosh emphasizes the subtle ways of civilizational imperialism that functions as more powerful, though it is an invisible tool in the hands of the colonizers.

Ghosh’s projection of colonial politics is viewed from twin perspectives. His unconventional presenting of the past, his inclination to understand politics/history through the past and his preference to understand it from the perspective of history which was unexplored, overlooked and neglected by the early novelists and even historians. Hence, *The Glass Palace* can be considered as a model of the history of the marginalized, voiceless and socially sidelined rather than those of historical figures like the kings,
queens, princes, commanders and so forth. On the other hand, the postcolonial writers interrogate the colonial politics and history, the conventional methods like, biographical, chronological, memoirs, documentary modes and so forth. Instead, they write alternative/parallel histories. It can also be viewed as a postmodernist stand to confront the paradoxes of fictive/historical representation, the particular, general, the present, and the past. In this process, sometimes, novel and history overlap as history and fiction are human constructs. A body of narrative discourse cannot strictly be categorized either as history or as fiction; it feels like something in between. Thus, Ghosh’s works seem pre-eminently rooted in history dealing with not only the politics of recent decades, but those of earlier times as well.

*The Glass Palace* begins with the Anglo-British war of 1885. The British seize Burma with the help of two senior ministers of Burma, Kinwun Mingyi and Taingda Mingyi to handover the Royal family. For this, the British offer them huge a sum. For the sake of bribe, they betray the Royal Family.

The two ministers were now competing with one another to keep the Royal Family under guard. They knew the British would be grateful to whoever handed over the royal couple; there would be rich rewards. The foreigners were expected to come to Mandalay very soon to take the King and Queen into captivity (25).

The king, Thebaw and the Queen Supayalat surrender along with their servants without any protest to the British Army. As soon as the British soldiers occupy the Royal Palace of Burma, the ministers, courtiers, soldiers, servants, the common people turn
unruly and shun their loyalty to the Royal Family. The troop of the British soldiers march towards the city: “There was no rancor on the soldiers’ faces no emotion at all” (25). Just before the sunset, the soldiers carry away “cartloads of booty from the palace” (30). Soon the common people also loot the royal palace. The royal couples along with some of their servants are transported to Vellore in South India and then to West-Coast District, Rathnagiri, in Maharastra, an isolated port over a hundred and twenty miles south of Bombay.

Ghosh is known for his concern for the subalterns and their history. Rajkumar Raha, the protagonist, an eleven-year old orphan comes to Mandalay from Chittagong after the death of his family members due to fever. A boat owner employs him in his crew as a helper and errand-boy. Since the boat gets struck on the way to Irrawaddy for repairs, he has to seek some other job in the city, Mandalay, the Burmese Royal capital. There Rajkumar sees the people looting the Royal Palace, wonders to see the splendor and riches of pre-colonial Burma and the subsequent attack by the British Army and the ouster of the Burmese kingdom.

Ghosh depicts the exile of the King Thebaw of Burma along with his family in quite a persuasive manner. The dethronement and exile are prompted by the exploitative motives of the colonizers. The purpose behind this attack of the British is the economic reason, to exploit the precious natural resources like Petroleum and Teak of Burma. When Rajkumar comes to know the reason for the attack, he avers, “A war over wood? Who’s ever heard of such a thing?” (15). Thus, he mocks at this strange reason behind the attack and criticizes the unreasonable demand of the colonizers. Following their withdrawal, the palace doors are left open and unguarded and soldiers and servants who
have been in the service of the King begin to loot the left over things from the palace. The Royal family is exiled unceremoniously; the King, Thebaw feels humiliated because he was publicly demoted, and dishonoured, discomfited and they have to be at the mercy of the soldiers. Besides, the Royal family is being sent on exile, as per protocol, the British Government provides them an escort of attendants. The servants do not come forward to escort the Royal family, who were serving earlier. The most trusted servants avert their faces to go with the Royal family as it has lost the power. “They were neither the king’s friends nor his confidants and it was not in their power to lighten the weight of his crown” (41). It is due to the exile of the King which shatters the loyalties and the obligations. No one except some girls who were attending the Queen and the Princesses come forward to accompany the Royal family as:

They were orphans; they alone of the palace retainers had nowhere else to go, no families, and no other means of support. The girls who accompany the Royal family are brought to the palace from the mountains. The Queen’s agents have purchased these young girls from small villages and the Queen has adopted them and taken their responsibility to bring them up while they serve as her handmaids. Some of them are Christians, and some from Buddhist, most of them are orphans and come from very poor families, already in exile, no matter once they come mean they have lost their identity and nativity. What they do but to go with the King and Queen” (42).

The exile of the King, his family and dependents is due to political compulsions and also it is an enforced displacement. It is the colonial politics of the British as they
exile the royal families with some or the other pretext to loot the wealth and exploit the natural resources of the countries. For the greed of British he Burmeese King has to shun all his majesty, power, dignity, self-respect, freedom and even the place where he was born. The Queen, Supalayat challenges this by asking the District Collector:

We have heard so many lectures from you and your colleagues on the subject of the barbarity of the kings of Burma and he humanity of Angrez; we are tyrants you said, enemies of freedom, murderers. English alone understand liberty, we were told; they do not put kings and princes to death; they rule through laws. If that is so, why has king Thebaw never been brought to trial? Is it a crime to defend your country against an invader? Would the English not do the same? (150).

In a similar way, the British exile many kings in India- Chikaveera Rajendra of South India, Duleep Singh of Punjab and many Indian princely states were annexed by imposing arbitrary laws like Doctrine of Lapse, Subsidiary Alliance and so on. Although the novel examines the historical, political, socio-cultural, philosophical and humanitarian issues, it mainly concentrates on the particular context of Colonial Politics of the British. In the complex plot of the novel that spreads for more than a century, three generations and three countries, all occurrences are interconnected around the theme of colonial politics, both literal and philosophical.

Apart from the royal family, Ghosh presents the fate of a number of other characters. Saya John, Beni Prasad Dey, Uma Dey, Alison, Neel, Dinu and others. Saya John, like Rajkumar and Dolly, is an orphan who was brought up by the Priests, in
Malacca. He leaves for Singapore where he works as an orderly in a military Hospital. The soldiers, most of them Indians there, make fun of Saya John, because he is Chinese with a Christian name who speaks their language and call him a “dhobi ka kutta na ghar ka na ghat ka,” (10), means, “a washerman’s dog does not belong anywhere, either to the house or to the cemetery”. It is one of the worst consequentialties of the exiled people in the colonial period who had to live without identity. Displacements, crisis of identity, hybridization, helplessness, belonging nowhere are the consequences of colonization. Saya John works in Burma as a supplier of Provisions to the Teak camps. In the later stages, when Rajkumar joins him in his business, both become considerably rich in the land of their exile, make the best of the circumstances created by the colonizers in the region.

Ghosh highlights the colonial politics of the British in the opening chapters of the novel. The people who attack the Palace, the whole British troop about two-thirds were Indian sepoys. They were seasoned, committed and battle-hardened, over the decades had proved their worth in the Warfield to the British who have been exploiting their native land- India as their colony. Saya John questions the Indian soldiers thus:

What makes you fight; I would ask them when you should be planting your fields at home? “Money”, they’d say, and yet all they earned was a few annas a day, not much more than a dockyard coolie. For a few coins, they would allow their masters to sue them as they wished, to destroy every trace of resistance to the power of the English… I would look into those faces and I would ask myself: what would it be like if I had something to defend- a home, a country, a family- and I found myself
attacked by these ghostly men, these trusting boys? How do you fight an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger, but in submission to orders from superiors, without protest without conscience? (29-30).

The British with the help of Indian soldiers attacking the glass palace is highly symbolic. In order to explore and exploit the forest wealth under inhuman and hostile surroundings, the British employ young men to work in the forest and oil wells as long as they can endure the dangerous situation and unhealthy climate. Saya John, who conveys the voice of the novelist, indirectly exposing these aspects of imperialism points out: “these young Europeans… have at best two or three years in the jungle before malaria and dengue fever weaken them to the point where they cannot afford to be far from doctors and hospitals” (74). The purpose of the British East India Company was to use these young men as mere tools to serve and further its interest of the company:

It knows that within a few years these men will be permanently aged, old at twenty-one; and that they will have to be posted off to city offices. It is only when they are freshly arrived, seventeen or eighteen, that they lead this life, and during those few years the company must drive such profit from them as it can (74).

*The Glass Palace* candidly reflects on the social, economical, political and cultural situation from the point of view of the history of the nation. It weaves the innumerable strands of stories of three generations together and metamorphoses otherwise melodramatic stories into a profound tale of three nations caught in a period of historic and political turmoil. Meenakshi Mukherjee comments: “*The Glass Palace* will
remain for me memorable mainly as the most scathing critique of British colonialism I have ever come across in Fiction” (The Hindu). Ghosh depicts numerous instances of the British colonial politics and its overall impact on the masses of the colonies- having tough bearing on their psyches, cultures, lives, livelihoods, socio-economic, conditions, power-positions and their identities.

The Burmese are presented entirely as victims of British colonialism, but people like Rajkumar and Saya John, the neo-colonizers, employ similar strategies of the British on their own people to make quick money. The politics of exile and exploitation depicted even in private family matters is shown as human tendency of subjectivity and subjugation. Ghosh also exposes the tyranny and despotism of native rulers. The Queen Supayalat stands as a testimony to this tyranny, “the fiercest and most willful, the only one who could match her mother in guile and determination” (38). In order to protect her husband, she banishes even her mother and her powers along with her sisters and co-wives. She orders to kill the members of the royal family whom she considered might ever be a threat to her husband’s crown.

Seventy nine-princes were slaughtered on her orders, some of them newborn infants, and some too old to walk. To prevent the spillage of royal blood she had them wrapped in carpets and bludgeoned to death. The corpses were thrown into the nearest river (38-39).

Supayalat is visibly the power behind the throne; his advisors, on the other hand, kept the King Thebaw, in blissful ignorance. He has not stepped out of the palace in seven years and has never left Mandalay. It shows that the Queen is despotic and
inhuman and is not respected by her own people. She is notoriously cruel and has murdered people whom she thought were threat to the throne. Ghosh also wants to show the cruelties of the native rulers who were worse than the British. In a way, the people of Burma think that the British are better rulers than their own Kings.

The exiled royal family was sheltered in Outram House at the outskirts of Ratnagiri. When the British representative, Beni Prasad Dey, an ICS, trained in England, the District Collector and also the care-taker of Royal family visits the House in connection with the princess’s marriage to a commoner, the angry Queen Supayalat attacks British, their exploitation of natural resources and Indian employees through Beni Prad Dey;

In a few decades, the wealth will be gone- all the gems, the timber and the oil- and then they will leave… This is what awaits us all; this is how we will all end- as prisoners, in shantytowns born of the plague. A hundred years hence, you will read the indictment of Europe’s greed in the difference between the kingdom of Siam and the state of our own enslaved realm (76).

Beni Prasd Dey, acts as a ‘brainchild of Macaulay’, has to please the British always who made him a Collector. He does his duty as a mere intermediary between the British and the Burmese royal family and is placed in the most awkward situation by the pregnancy of one of the princes and the prospect of her marriage to the Indian servant, Sawant, who is responsible for her pregnancy. Beni Prasad Dey is a failure- as a husband and as a Collector; he could not do justice to his family as well as to his profession. The
news of demotion comes to him at a bad time, his wife, Uma has decided to leave him and return to her parents. As a result, he cannot withstand this double reversal of his fortunes. Due to mental pressures, he commits suicide drowning in the sea. He seems to be an ineffectual or a passive character in the novel. His wife, Uma Dey “Madam Collector” who is 15 years younger to him, lived as his shadow considers her husband as a slave to the British and as a ‘Mimic man’, a lackey of the colonizer. But the colonizers projected him as he was ‘one of the most successful Indians of his generation, a model for his countrymen’. After the death of her husband, Ums feels free and books passage to Europe. In London, she becomes a leader of the movement to free India and meets there some prominent leaders. She is upright, educated and independent; she can forgo her love for the sake of her self-respect.

Rajkumar and Saya John the business partners catapult into prosperity in the land of their exile. Understanding the existential dilemma, both make the best of the circumstances created by the colonizers in the South-Asian region. Along with Saya John’s son, Matthew, they engage in the task of colonizing the land and the people for the sake of wealth. Rajkumar’s story is a story of the struggle for survival in the colonial turmoil. As a colonized in Bengal, he becomes a colonizer in Burma luring indentured laborers from the South of India to other parts of the British colonies. He loses his humanity completely for the sake of money. His trade of indentured labour from India for the British oil fields, his exploitation of own people for the material greed, his illegal affair with a woman, his support of colonization that has helped him to become rich shows he lacks human values and business ethics. Rajkumar believes that the British are indispensible for the progress and prosperity of Burma. His views that ‘the economy of
Burma would collapse if the British leave. There would be chaos if there were no English people in India’. Thus, he vows his prosperity to the British. Beni Prasad Dey also holds a similar opinion that; Indians would not have flourished in Burma if there was no British rule. Such views took roots in India as well and the novel gives many such instances to illustrate the subtle processes of colonialist propaganda/indoctrination in the colonies.

Only at the end, Uma Dey attacks Rajkumar Raha for being selfish and exploiting his own people for profit. She calls him a neo-colonialist and criticizes his attitude: “It’s people like you who’re responsible for this tragedy... Did you ever think of the consequences when you were transporting people here? What you and your kind have done is far worse than the worst deeds of Europeans” (214). Uma also opens the eyes of Indian soldiers who were working under the British Army. The British told their Indian sepoys that they were freeing Indian people “from their bad kings or their evil customs or some such things,” and the Indians had believed it because the British had made them believe it. “It took us a long time to understand”, The soldier had told her, “that their eyes freedom exists wherever they rule” (193). Such stories had spread in the history of British rule in India. Only sensitive people like Uma can understand the British politics, not people like Rajkumar and Beni Prasad Dey. It shows that, either poverty and need or opportunism and greed that destroyed the conscience of most of the Indians in the colonial system. Even Ghosh criticises the British for using Indian soldiers for their purpose and questions the ethics of serving in someone else’s army is a theme that runs through the novel. Saya John tells the Indian soldier as, “an enemy who fights from neither enmity nor anger… without protest and without conscience… and innocent evil”
Ghosh underscores the wicked manipulation of the British Empire that used Indian Soldiers to subjugate Indians themselves.

The colonial power, known for its alleged exploitation, dehumanizes people who come under its purview. As the colonial discourse often reveals, the colonial power is used both as an ideological state apparatuses and as a repressive state apparatus to control the colonial purpose. This finds an expression in *The Glass Palace*, complicity of the Indians with the British and their role in continuing the colonial system. One can witness this in Arjun Roy, the nephew of Uma Dey who joins as an officer in the British Indian Army. He is subservient to the British officers and English culture as well. Both Arjun and Hardayal Singh blindly adore British and imitate them like ‘black skin with white mask’ come up in life firmly believing in the supremacy of the British. Both are intoxicated by the glamour of being one of the first Indian officers feel themselves modern, fail to understand that they are being used as instruments by the British to kill their own people. Arjun and Hardayal Singh, known as Hardy, whose greatest ambition is to serve as soldiers in the British Indian Army, both become officers of higher rank. Their accepting higher position in military is associated with the social status and pride- “we’re the ones who actually live with Westerners” (279). Both adopt English ways of life and culture and become intoxicated with it. Arjun is ready to give up all the identities of being Indian, leaving behind his cultural past to embrace Western ways of life. To be an English Gentleman, he apes their manners, behavior and wears Western clothes. It never strikes to his mind to whom and why he is serving. At the end, both caught in an ethical dilemma, realize that they are poor, and the British have never accepted them as equals. Arjun introspects that: “everything he had ever assumed about himself was a lie, an
illusion. And if this were so, how was he to find himself now? (372). The British were successful in creating such impressions ‘the superior’ among the people in India. When Uma makes him aware of his position as a slave, he then realizes that the British are wicked and understands the colonial politics. Then he becomes a staunch Nationalist and decides to fight for his country. It is evident that, the poverty, need, opportunism and greed killed the conscience of most of the Indians during the colonial rule. Arjun’s realization is touching:

   We rebelled against an Empire that has shaped everything in our lives; coloured everything in the world as we know it. It is a huge indelible stain which has tainted all of us. We cannot destroy it without destroying ourselves. And that, I suppose, is where I am…(518).

Ghosh highlights the cunning manipulation of the Empire that used Indian soldiers to subjugate Indians themselves. Both Arjun and Hardayal, the great admirer of British and dedicated officers in the British Indian Army disillusioned and distressed by the crocked politics of the British. This in fact is a fine instance of colonizer-colonized discourse.

The interference of politics in different fields of life tends to subordinate human concerns to the motive related to power. Power politics does not allow the social and cultural institutions to work for the dignity of human beings. Instead of being in the centre, man is pushed to periphery to the level of a means to serve the ends of those in power that control different institutions. Ghosh deliberately brings Auang San Suu Ki, the leader who struggled to uphold the democratic values against the tyrannical rule of
military Junta and is presented as the embodiment of true humanism in the human independence.

*The Glass Palace* shows how the colonial authority clearly rested on the colonizer’s epistemological bases widely accepted by the colonized. Foucault in his seminal work, *Power and Knowledge* shows how ‘knowledge’ about the subject race was part of the process of maintaining power over them. Both Said and Foucault emphasized in their work to expose the connections between the structures of thought and the workings of power. They have clearly established how power works through language, literature, culture and the institutions which regulate our daily lives. Amitav Ghosh too creates in this novel a discourse that dramatizes the evolution of colonialist antithesis. He explores the anti-colonial consciousness and the eventual revolt in Arjun and Hardayal Singh.

The novel focuses candidly on the painful reality of the British colonization of India and its soldiers’ plight who fought for the Empire in the name of England in several countries. They could realize that their excellent force is contrivance being used against Britain’s colonized people, including themselves.

Ghosh offers exhaustive details of the causes and consequences of colonization and the niceties of British politics and particularly in critical circumstances. *The Glass Palace* explicates the dubious stratagies of the colonizers to exploit the natural resources of the nations to cater to the needs for their industries in England. Besides, the novel examines critically the reasons for deposing the monarch, dislocating the native population forcibly, disorganizing the indigenous public life and so on. Ghosh quite
deftly portrays the commercial and imperialist strategies of the British, for the accomplishment of which they have waged, unlawful, barbaric, evil and inhuman wars and exploited, pillaged, damaged, disturbed and destroyed the colonial societies and cultures all over the world.

Perhaps one can view *The Glass Palace* as a counter discourse to the Eurocentric constructions of the West. Thus, it challenges the institutionalized perspectives of the colonial politics. The British Empire had developed its own discourse of self-validation, which makes it tough to replace it from its deeply ingrained position. In *The Glass Palace* perhaps Ghosh attempts to show the power politics of the British. In a way, he revisits the colonial past to dismantle the colonial construction of history. The novel also offers an imaginative reconstruction of the history in the most turbulent times of recent colonial history. “The colonizer’s settlement in the colonization process involved not only physical occupation of the land and imposition of alien government on the colonized place, but also “mental colonization” (Fanon *The wretched of the Earth* 43). In the context of colonialism, Fanon contends that: “the settler only ends his work of breaking in the native when the later admits loudly and intelligibly” (157). What impresses the reader of *The Glass Palace* is Ghosh’s accuracy, thoughtfulness, precision backed by meticulous research. Thus, the novel blurs the line between history and literature. It attempts to alter the received/perceived historical opinions without evading the notions of historicity or historical determination. *The Glass Palace* perhaps can be viewed as a historiographic metafiction where the conventions of both history and fiction are used and also get subverted. Ghosh’s novels seem pre-eminently immersed in history and in not only the politics of recent decades, but those of earlier times as well. R. K. Dhavan
rightly points out that, “Amitav Ghosh is perhaps the finest writer among those who were born out of the post-Midnight’s Children revolution in Indian English fiction” (Dhawan 11)

*The Glass Palace* quite obviously reflects on the political situation in the former colonies from the point of view of the colonized as well as colonizers. It can be viewed as a political novel which focuses on the consequences of the Empire on the colonized people. In a sense, it is about the deconstruction of the history of the nations and re-formation of the same. Thus, the novel holds up to scrutiny the people and countries caught up in many a historic and political crisis. For this purpose, Ghosh uses a big canvas to cover the colonialist discourse in all its structures of thought, ideologies, vocabulary, duplicity, hypocrisy, and self-contradiction. It is apt to quote Edward Said in this connection, ‘by 1914…Europe held a grand total of 85 percent of the earth as colonies (Said 189). This epic sort of sweep provides the reader as well as the writer the space necessary to unravel the processes of colonialization and of revolt against the colonizers across the countries. Only sensitive minds like, Uma Dey, is able to sense the wily nature of the British rule, pitted against the Burmese in order to safeguard their interests to fortify the Empire. Thus, the novel displays social, historical, political, economical, cultural, linguistic and physical dislocations brought about by colonial occupation.

The title *The Glass Palace* is mentioned twice in the novel. In the beginning, it is the Burmese Royal palace of the King Thebaw and later becomes a symbol of the British Imperial Empire. The meaning of the title *The Glass Palace* seems appropriate as Ghosh mentions in the novel; The Glass Palace represents the glory of British Kingdom.
Through the exploitation and suppression of the colonized countries, the British built a glorious Glass Palace as the Pride of England which is fragile as well as attractive.

At best, the title might represent the destruction, depredation and exploitation by the British. But going a little beyond the denotative reference, one will hit upon the resonance and recollect the unmistakable allusion to the Crystal Palace built in England during Queen Victoria’s reign to commemorate reflect the power, glory and wealth of the British Empire, as fragile brittle as the glass that was used for its construction, even as it was meant to mirror the remarkable achievement of the British in the colonies. But ironically, the crystal palace is as much an emblem of British prowess, as it is of the exploitation of the colonized. The British palace was erected, in a sense, on the ruins of the likes of the Glass Palace; for the novel goes beyond showing the plunder of the Burmese palace; it points to the exploitation in other British colonies as well” (T. Vinoda)

**Shashi Throor’s *Riot: A Novel.* (2001)**

Shashi Tharoor (1956- ) a multifaceted personality, was born in London and got educated in Bombay, Calcutta, and USA, did his graduation in History at St. Stephen’s College, Delhi, got Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. He was a UN diplomat in Geneva. Tharoor is a political commentator, politician, former Union Cabinet Minister, novelist, columnist and a rationalist writer. He is known for his experimental novels. Tharoor’s *Riot: A Novel* explores the subtleties of
power politics in contemporary India in the backdrop of demolition of the sixteenth century mosque, Babri Masjid in Ayodhya, in 1992 which led to a communal violence. It also takes up the issues such as, the growing Hindu militancy and the communal tension, religious intolerance between the Hindus and Muslims and the cultural clash between the East and the West. As a multilayered narrative, the novel sheds light on many contemporary issues like history, politics, society, economy and culture of India. Tharoor in one of his interviews expresses what India mean to him:

If America is a melting pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different, and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.

(Web Source)

The Hindu-Muslim communities lived together for centuries sharing the geographic space, customs, food, language and history of India. Though there were differences, they were not much conspicuous. The friction of communalism started in the early decades of twentieth century, due to the foul play of British colonial politics, which encouraged two nations’ policy- India and Pakistan. Since the British did not want the Hindus and the Muslims fight against them. When India got political freedom the consequent partition resulted in millions of Hindus and Muslims getting killed, a painful episode in the annals of Indian history.

It is said that, religion cannot be separated from the politics. In fact, politics has to be kept separate from religion if one wants to see a healthy society. It is unfortunate that, the present day politicians use politics into religion or religion as an integral part of their
politics. When religion enters into politics, no doubt it becomes the root cause of communalism which leads to violence. This communalism is attributed by vested interests in the society. Asgar Ali Engineer is of the view that “the communal phenomenon is a political genesis” (34). To grab the power and for the sake of survival, politicians indirectly involve or encourage communal violence which leads to a permanent divide of a society. They make use of it according to the situation to suit their purpose. In a way, communalism is a kind of politicization of religious identity, an ideology that seeks to promote conflict between religious communities. Communal violence leaves behind latent hostilities and a single spark will be sufficient enough for the outbreak of violence again and again. India is a fine example of communal clashes between Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs which have continued since pre-independence to this day. The partition violence, Hindu-Sikh riots, Ram Janmabhoomi violence and Godhra incidents have left such a deep scar in the hearts of people belonging to these three communities often leading to fresh violence. Thus, communalism has become a major issue because it is employed as a strategy in politics. For this, the politicians are ready to sacrifice certain ‘political values’ which were long cherished by Statesman like Mahatma Gandhi, Pt. Jawaharlal Nehru, Lal Bahadur Shastri, Jayaprakash Narayan and others.

Most political conflicts in the twentieth century in India have two aspects- the nationalist Movement clashing with the British Government. In addition, the Hindu-Muslim encounters encouraged and masterminded by the Britishers helped to serve their political purposes. Kushwant Singh makes a valid comment in this connection:
Though the English gave India its unity, they were also responsible for its disunity and ultimate break-up into India and Pakistan. They played the divide-and-rule game with little subtlety. For some decades after the Mutiny, the Musalman was the villain, the Hindu the pampered subject. After the Indian National Congress began to gather support, the Hindu became suspect, the Muslim was granted special privileges and encouraged to oppose the Hindu. The Muslim League (born 1906) was an egg hatched by Lord Minto’s white leghorn. The most blatant example of the British design to alienate the Muslims from the Hindus was the partition of Bengal the growth of a Mohammaedian power, which, it is hoped, will have the effect of keeping in check the rapidly growing strength of the Hindu community (*India: An Introduction* 148).

The British believed in, ‘No riot, no Raj’. To serve their purpose they virtually divided the two major ethnic groups, Hindus and Muslims. The later and larger conflicts between the two communities are outcome of this British conspiracy, which is based on the subtle policy of Divide and Rule.

Tharoor maintains an ironic detachment between himself and his central character through whose consciousness all the events are presented. Tharoor rather procreates history than propagate it. He does not negate the possibilities of alternative histories. In a pluralist situation like India, no single given version of history is acceptable because there is no single history but histories. Tharoor’s rejection of colonial version does not silence the possibilities of other Indian voices. In an interview, he says:
My notion of an Indian identity is in any case a plural identity that cherishes disparity. I think the nature of India is such that our nationalism is not based on any one layer or narrow identity…nor geography, nor religion, nor that of any race in the western sense… it’s the fact that we are sharing certain dreams together. (Asgar Ali 6)

Communal disharmony has adversely affected the peace and harmony of the city Jalilgarh in U.P. the simmering conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims, seeded by the cunningness of the colonizers and fanned by the tragic event of partition. Tharoor does not spare the fanatics be it the Hindus or the Muslims. But in nearly every case, the protests one encounters in India come from publicity hounds, political parties and little known organizations who have no clear link with the historical figure in question.

Religion, secularism, politics, violence and communalism are inextricably linked to each other. They have acquired significance in the Indian psyche since colonial times. As many political and social forces have unleashed themselves in the past six decades, it has achieved new significance in recent times. There are many views regarding what constitutes the nature and relationship between religion and politics. It is pertinent to know what both eminent political leaders, Gandhiji and Nehru have said about religion and politics. Gandhiji is of the view: “For me, politics bereft of religion is absolute dirt, ever to be shunned” (Pravin Jha 216). For Gandhi, religion means morality, in the sense of dharma. He also asserts that, “the politics should be based on religion; he clearly meant that it should have moral foundation in dharma or a code of conduct or in truth and non-violence…” (Pravin Jha 217).
It is very difficult in the modern world to ignore the presence of religion in public affairs. Hence, to the extent that religion is a part of that communal identity, that common culture, that historical continuity, so religion and ‘nation’ become closely entangled: religion can be a means through which a nation expresses its identity and aspirations. (Asger Ali 7). Interestingly, both religion and politics have a lot to do with each other. They interface in a number of important but complex ways be it at the local, national or international level; whether it involves ordinary citizens, activists or prominent political leaders; whether it concerns legislative institutions, pressure groups or competing political parties and ideologies; whether it is the First World of liberal democracy, the Second World of state socialism, the Third World of developing countries or the Fourth World of abject poverty, religion and politics relate. Secularization and modernization have not marginalized religion in the modern society. Drastic changes in their relationship have taken place over the last few decades, but those changes have by no means ushered in the desired change in the society.

Tharoor proves his creative genius and intellectual prowess in Riot: A Novel. His interest in history, politics, social, moral, ethical and cultural issues of his day led him to inquire into the country’s past and to interpret and interrogate. Riot was published by two different publishers, Viking Penguin (in India) and Arcade Publishing (in America) with different cover designs and subtitles perhaps, to suit the readers of different sensibilities and in turn, to reach a wider readers. He explores the contours of India’s history and communal identity through multiple narrations privileged through an array of diverse narrative modes. Being a diplomat in UN, Tharoor seems to search the
way-out of pacifying communal violence which has been plaguing the Indian society to a
great extent.

History, politics and culture have predominantly been a primary concern of the
contemporary Indian novelists in English. Tharoor uses history to disentangle the politics
behind the communal violence. Moreover, the specific point in history that Tharoor has
chosen for his purpose is the riot that took place in Uttar Pradesh in 1992, on December
6, in the context of Ramjanmabhoomi and Babri Masjid controversy. Keeping this as a
background, Tharoor adds imaginary incidents to unfold the mysterious killing of an
American woman, Pricilla Hart. The novelist through various voices and characters,
News clippings, personal letters, notebooks, diaries, extracts from academic texts, poems,
transcripts of interviews and letters attempts to find the ‘truth’ from different
perspectives. Tharoor uses this kind of multilayered narrative technique to depict the
reality from multiple points of view to throw light on many contemporary serious issues
such as, society, religion, economy, history, politics, culture and so on in postcolonial
India. However, all these views fail to reveal the ‘truth’ behind the murder of an innocent
American woman. As an intellectual, Tharoor writes with malevolence/malice towards all
the communities, politicians, religious bigots and the bureaucrats without being caught by
the controversy, lambasts these institutions. In one of his interviews, Tharoor comments:
“Riot is a novel about the ownership of history, about love, hate, cultural collision
religious fanaticism and impossibility of knowing the truth” (Web Source).

Riot is based on a series of incidents. First, Harsh Mander, an IAS Officer and a
classmate of Tharoor, a District Magistrate, mails him a detailed report about the riot in
Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, which has obvious echoes of communal strife both
preceding and leading up to the demolition of the Babri masjid in Ayodhya in 1992. Almost at the same time, he reads a newspaper report that an American woman has been killed in a racial violence in South Africa. *Riot: The novel* begins with the killing of a young woman, Pricilla Hart in the sectarian violence. A twenty-four year old Ph.D. student in an American University, Pricilla Hart is working as a volunteer in India, for the NGO, *Help Us*, whose main objective is birth control. She is stabbed to death sixteen times near an abandoned building called *Kotli*, at the outskirts of Zalilgargh. This incident coincides with the event of *Ram Shila Poojan* on the day when Hindu militants organized a major religious procession. Pricilla’s divorced parents- fifty five-year old father, Rudyard Hart, a senior marketing executive with the Coca-Cola Company, and her mother Catherine Hart, fly from America to visit the site of their daughter’s death. Randy Diggs, an American reporter accompanies them to prepare a report/story for the Western Media about her death. The District Magistrate, Lakshman, a thirty-three year old, South-Indian I.A.S. Officer, is a father of a nine year old daughter, had a discreet affair with Pricilla is bewildered by her murder. He is trapped in a loveless marriage with a typical South-Indian woman, Geetha who is brought up in a conventional society. Guriender Singh, the District Superintendent of Police, happened to be Lakshman’s friend, and he is in charge of the murder case. But he does not disclose the ‘truth’ that Priscilla is pregnant when she was killed. Her postmortem report hides this secret to save Lakshman.

Pricilla’s colleagues, Kadambari, the social worker, and Das, the project director, are mystified at her death. Gurinder Singh, an IPS, a hard drinking and foul-mouthed local Superintendent of Police, is not in a position to investigate the much-complicated case. Communal disharmony has adversely affected the peace and harmony of the city of
Zalilgarh in U.P. The conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims seeded by the cunning colonizers and fanned by the tragic event of Ram janmabhoomi goes unabated and has become a major concern for the sensitive writers. Tharoor does not spare the fanatics be it the Hindus or Muslims.

The fictional account and plot of the Riot is based on, the actual incidents related to the controversial Coca-Cola in India, the controversy of Ram Janambhoomi-Babri Masjid, and how the time-serving politicians and the Hindu-Muslim zealots are making use of this issue and politicizing for their survival are fused into one plot. However, Tharoor chooses to set his novel in 1989, perhaps his intention is to present the events as a small-scale incident or may be to avoid controversy of the historical events of three years later in 1992. Thus, Riot can be categorized as a historiographic metafiction a novel that deploys historical events and personages in an ironic or parodic form.

The clues supplied by the reports do not explore the mystery of the murder. Even Tharoor does not attempt to solve this mysterious murder, instead he tries to uncover the ‘truth’ behind the ultimate collision of violence during the communal riot which is sponsored by the political and religious groups. Randy Diggs, the American Journalist, meets the chauvinistic Hindu religious leader, Ramcharan Gupta to investigate the politics behind the riot in Zalilgarh. As an ardent devotee of Ram, Gupta supports the cause of construction of temple to Lord Ram. He is firm in his opinions: “In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple any more. It is the Ram Janam Bhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Rama. A fit site for a grand temple…” (52). He also tells Randy Diggs, that, “a Muslim king, the first Mughal king Babur, from central Asia, pulled it down and in its place he built a bit Masque, which was
named after him, the Babri Masjid”. He continues, “A Masque on Hindu’s holiest site! Muslim praying to Mecca on the very spot where our divine Lord Ram was born” (52). He strongly questions: “Would Muslims be happy if some Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca” (53). He further argues that Muslims are evil people.

They are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they have all descended from the conquerors of Arabia or Persia or Samarkand (56).

To him “Muslims are fanatics and terrorists; they only understand the language of force…Whether these Muslims are, they fight with others. Violence against non-Muslims is in their blood” (57). He says that hundreds of years Indians suffered under Muslim rule. Then the British came, and things were no better. They thought then that after independence, everything would change. Most of the Muslims in Ayodhya left for Pakistan. The Mosque was no longer much needed as a mosque. Then a miracle occurred. Some devotees found that an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of the mosque. It was a clear sign from God. His temple had to be built on that sacred spot. Hindus went to court. But the court said that neither Hindus nor Muslims could worship there and status quo had to be maintained.

Tharoor creates another character to counter this argument. Mohammad Sarwar, a Muslim scholar, teaches in the Department of History, Delhi University attempts to defend the minority psyche of Muslims. He opposes the “composite culture” or “composite religiosity” (64) which means different religious people living amicably or
harmoniously. He defends his religion by saying that Hindus worship Muslim religious saints in India, like Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chisti, Ghazi Miyan, Shaikh Nasiruddin, and Khwaja Khzir. He says Indian Muslims suffer disadvantages, even discrimination, in a hundred ways…” (112). India does not believe in secularism, hence the Hindutva brigade is trying to invent a new past for the nation for this they are fabricating historical wrongs and misappropriating the national glory. Thus, they want to teach Muslims a lesson. He points out that Muslims are part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. “Muslims gave India what she needed most, “the most precious gifts from Islam’s treasury, the message of human equality” (108). He proudly says that, without Muslims this splendid structure of India is incomplete, says, “Muslims didn’t partition the country-the British did, the Muslim league did, the Congress party did” (111). “Pakistan was created by “bad” Muslims…not by the “good” Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to speak” (109).

The District Collector and the Police Superindent’s mission is to control the riot at whatever cost. Lakshman could sense the futility of constructing the temple for Ram. Hence, he tries to maintain harmony between both the major communities knowing fully well that he is fighting a lost battle. He asks some fundamental questions, “But who owns India’s history? Are there my history and his and his history about- about the reclaiming of history by those who feel that they were, at one point, written out of the script? But they can write a new history without doing violence to the inheritors of the old?” (110). He also says that, “They (Hindus) want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge” (147).
Thus, Tharoor attempts to give a balanced/unbiased picture of the views of the different communities. Both the communities’ interests are politicized but innocents like Pricilla become victims. Only the politicians manipulate and exploit the mob psychology in the name of religion for their survival during the election. As far as the shifting paradigms of power politics are concerned, politics, instead of governing, has become the art of mis-governing by misusing bureaucracy. Such excess of mis-using of government machinery has become the order of the day. The power hungry hawkish politicians with their cunning power politics play with religion which leads to the sufferings of the innocent people. This unholy nexus of politicians and religious leaders is predominantly responsible for the problem of communalism. Thus, the temples and mosques become shortcuts for Assembly and Parliament. This has virtually damaged the image of India in the international arena. The recent example after 1992 is the riot in Hyderabad and in Godhra in Gujarat which claimed thousands of Hindus and Muslims. Ashish Nandi’s comments are relevant here:

This ambivalent fascination with communal ideology could have many sources. First, there is the fact that all political parties that have espoused the ‘Hindu’ or ‘Islamic’ causes have been heavily ideological parties. For various reasons, they have sought to plead their case primarily on ideological grounds. One reason could be that the stress on ideology makes organized violence against victim communities more palatable to the social sectors having a disproportionate access to, or control over, the state machinery, the judiciary and the media…. So both the spectator and
the organizers of such violence come to acquire a morbid fascination with ideology. *(The Past 11).*

Almost seventy years after the independence, the Indian novelists have been reflecting on the events- the partition and communal violence between Hindu-Muslims, the crisis of secularism, witnessing the alarming rise of militant Hindu chauvinism and Muslim fundamentalism and their ugly faces. Tharoor uses the device to facilitate multiple voices to interact. Such a dialogic process evolves and directs the course of the novel and the readers are drawn towards an understanding of the real issues at stake and the politics behind the communal violence and religious hatred in India. Tharoor allows different communities even the most fanatic ones are given a space to express their points of view. By using this strategy, the novelist has dared to expose the explosive issues from which communal conflicts are brewed. For this, he uses different voices, different stylistic forms for different fragments of stories.

Tharoor uses history to explore the politics behind the communal rage that is troubling India even now. For this, Tharoor selects bits from history, politics and present day communal consciousness and weaves them together with his imagination to create “intellectually provocative and emotionally charged” novel (from the blurb, Viking-Penguin). How the communal violence flare-up in the contemporary Indian political situation, what are the reasons, who are responsible, who are the victims, what are the motives/reasons behind these violence, who are the beneficiaries and so on are the serious issues discussed by the novelist. With an adept blending of fact and fiction, Tharoor enables the readers to get the whole episode into perspective. He selects bits from politics, history and present day communal consciousness and weaves them together with
bits from his imagination to create an awareness of how political leaders in the Indian multi-cultural, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society fabricate communal riots.

In an interview, Tharoor observes:

The themes concern me in this novel: love and of hate; cultural collision, in particular, in this case the Hindu/Muslim collision, the American/Indian collision and within India the collision between the English educated elites of India and people in the rural heartland; and as well, issues of unknowability of history, the way in which identities are constructed through an imagining of history; and finally perhaps, the unknowability of the truth (Web Source).

Perhaps Riot recreates one of the saddest phases- in India of contemporary times, the communal riots in the wake of Rama janmabhoomi agitation. It graphically depicts the spreading tentacles of communal violence, corruption in politics and bureaucracy that prove to be a major feature of Indian political system. To prove his point, Tharoor brings in various collisions- between individuals, between cultures, between ideologies and between religions. Thus, the strength of the novel lies in the unconventional narrative structure Tharoor employs.

Riot is a well-crafted novel with a compelling narrative. Xenophobia, sex, man’s social and political independence are some of its main concerns. Its endeavour is to knit history with the illusion of truth and romance fusing with the different characters from the different walks of life caught up in love and communal riots. Tharoor is a more sensitive writer concerned with interrogating the complex socio-political, historical and
cultural processes that bypass simple human issues in a bid for more and more radicalization of Hinduism, legitimizing the right wing *Hindutva* ideology. Today Indian politics is being fragmented on communal lines. It is further divided by the political parties for votes and for their survival. Both the communities, the Hindus and the Muslims always try to establish their power and superiority over other communities which leads to communal tensions. Multiculturalism, rather than a majoritarian ideology like *Hindutva*, is the only solution for a functioning polity in a democracy like India, perhaps seems the message of the novel *Riot*.

Tharoor provides the background for the communal riots that are taking place now and then in India. Most Hindus believe that in the sixteenth century the Mughal Emperor Zakir-ud-din Muhammad Babur, a Muslim invader from Central Asia, knocked down the temple at Ayodhya, built a big mosque called the Babri Masjid in its place where Lord Rama was believed to have been born. There is a lot of debate as to whether the Hindu temple was there before and a mosque was built on the most sacred site. The Hindus claim that it should be replaced by a temple. In 1947, when the partition of India took place, a sizable Muslim population from Ayodhya migrated to Pakistan. At this point, a group of Hindus claimed that an idol of Lord Rama had emerged in the now disputed site. When the dispute went to the court, the District Magistrate simply put a padlock to the temple, and ordered that neither Hindus nor Muslims could worship there. The status quo was maintained until 1989. Nonetheless, the Hindu fundamentalists began to demand that the padlock be removed, and the agitation took on a more dangerous colour in the year 1992, when the Babri Masjid was demolished by a rioting Hindu mob.
Selecting, society, history, politics and culture as major issues, Tharoor goes back to the past as an outsider and sees these issues objectively. With irony, he transforms it into historiographical metafiction, which unearths history by presenting historical, political events and characters. He transforms the act of storytelling into a political activity. He, in particular, by going back to the ancient roots and by retelling the story of the *Mahabharatha* and *Rama Janamabhoomi*, problematizes the past issues to find new possible answers to the problem. History, myth and fiction are interlinked in the intertextual circularity of his works. However, in *Riot* Tharoor attempts to carry a certain degree of ‘truth’ and shows one more possibility of looking at the same event from different perspective. He attempts to communicate reality, however, disjointed the sequences seem to be. Such diverse versions, in a way, help the readers to perceive the meaning more clearly and the sensibility reflected in the novel enable the readers to re-evaluate the entire scenario. But to avoid controversy, Throor changes the date and year of the events. He maintains an ironic detachment between himself and his central characters through whose consciousness all the events are presented. Tharoor rather attempts to create history than propagate it. He does not negate the possibilities of alternative histories. In a pluralist situation like India, no single given version of history is acceptable. Tharoor’s rejection of colonial version does not silence the possibilities of other Indian voices. In one of the interviews Tharoor remarks:

> My notion of an Indian identity is in any case a plural identity that cherishes disparity. I think the nature of India is such that our nationalism is not based on any one layer or narrow identity…nor geography, nor
religion, nor that of any race in the western sense… it’s the fact that we are sharing certain dreams together.

One has to blame Indian politicians who have fractured the political system. Indian politics has become so fragmented all a political parties see some advantage in catering to the prejudices of a particular caste or religious groups. In an era of coalitions and caste and religious politics, liberal democracy is the real loser. At the same time, the Media- print and visual are also equally responsible. The protesters of both the religion vandalize the public property, burn effigies of particular person and take initiative to invite television crew on the scene. The responsible citizens of the country must preserve freedom of expression and at the same time one must recognize the importance of news judgment and a sense of proportion. The fact is that in the era of competitive media, which always search for sensational news, if the target is sufficiently high profile, the hype will be more sensational.

Thus, the politicians of both the parties want to keep the fire burning for their benefit. By doing so, they try to gain the confidence of both the communities, instead of solving the problem. At the same time, the disputed site of Rama Janmabhoomi continues to feed the political competition. Lakshman, while explaining to Priscilla the history of India, remarks:

Why should today’s Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done four hundred and fifty years ago? It’s just politics, Pricilla. The twentieth century of deprivation has eroded the culture’s confidence. The Hindu chauvinism has emerged from the competition for resources in a
continuous democracy. Politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities. (145).

Incidentally, the fundamental cause of communal riots in India is the pursuit of political advantage at any cost. Despite the attempts made by secular nationalist leaders and historians, a divisive history has acquired a hegemonic place in the academic textbooks and in the national mythology of the country which defines the century old arrival of the Islamic religion, where Muslim bigots converted Indians into Islam by force. The present Muslim population in India is considered in the history of the Indian nation “as a foreign element”. Ninety five percent of the Muslims in the subcontinent are converts. Ram Charan Gupta, the Hindu leader in the novel opines, “Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it up into little pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away” (57).

Communal riot meant opportunity for certain anti-social forces in the society. The politicians delegate plenty of power for a handful of their loyalists, sycophants and to anti-social elements, and feed them to create some disturbance in the society for their gain. They also politicize Bureaucracy; make attempts to foist/impose restriction on the democratic polity and misuse the authority. All these have become the order of the day. The unethical manipulation of power subverts not only parliamentary democracy but also the moral and ethical values in personal relations. The politicians flout all democratic norms with the assistance of a generally ineffective bureaucracy interested only in self-preservation. The political chaos in the country is presented through the consciousness of the people who are the victims of power politics. The power and its varied manifestations like violence, tyranny and totalitarianism gain upper hand in such situations.
Tharoor points that the Hindu-Muslim animosity has a long history. It started during the colonial period and gained momentum during Indian National Movement. The British on the religious lines instigated the Muslim leaders for separate nation, which led to partition of the country. The religious identity of the Hindus and Muslims, and religiously plural country like India faces complex problems in a democratic setup. Each group mobilizes the masses by using religious identities in order to put pressure on the system and gain greater share of political power. There is a covert strain of the rising trends of extremism, fundamentalism, obscurantism and populism. In the course of the struggle for power, the hatred of one community over the other which intensified in the late nineteenth century and culminated during the partition of India in 1947. Communalisms struck deep roots in both the Hindu and the Muslim communities acquired a partly self-sustaining momentum and at the same time were fed by political competition. The novel Riot traces the growth of sadistic political culture percolating from the states to the centre.

Thus, the novel Riot is about clash of cultures, individuals, collision between mobs, and the Hindu-Muslim collision. Riot presents an authentic picture of various forces that scramble for supremacy in India: the forces of secularism, tolerance, love, and compassion on the one hand, and the forces of communalism, fundamentalism and fanaticism, on the other. Ramcharan Gupta, a firebrand Hindu chauvinist who feels that the Taj Mahal, the mausoleum of Mughal emperor and his wife, is a Hindu temple. In a way Tharoor challenges, interrogates and problematizes the history, historicity and historiography.
I become sharply aware of the lines, sometimes clear, sometimes blurred, between real sites and dispute sites. Let me begin with couple of literal sites—physical structures. On December 6, 1992, the Babri Masjid was demolished. Since then, there have been many specific sites that have been turned from real, living sites to disputed sites vulnerable to demolition in some way or the other (Web Source).

As in the case of Ayodhya, there was nothing spontaneous or unplanned about the act of demolition. The perpetrators could not be easily dismissed as part of some lunatic fringe indulging in an isolated sample of destruction. What was happening was a case of a real site being taken over for unofficial censorship. Once the censorship process was done, not only was the real site transformed into a disputed one, not only was it often physically demolished or scarred; but its memory, its meaning for the people at large, was challenged. The historical and cultural landmarks in people’s minds become disputed structures.

Tharoor takes on the Indian politicians as political players of modern India who have been pursuing their selfish ends rather than the nation’s interest. His cynical as well as realistic perspective is not without the comic element, which prompts him to recreate the political drama in the absurd mode. Tharoor perhaps implies here that any amount of interference of religion in politics will invariably lead to communal clashes. However, most of the Indian politicians are never committed to a policy of religious neutrality, but indirectly they give tacit encouragement to the religious groups. It is because some wily politicians have their own purposes in religious interference by provoking people of one community against another community to create a kind of religious disharmony among
different communities. In a way, they create problems so that they could keep the issues alive and burning to preserve their vote banks solid to win elections. Common people cannot understand these political nuances and fall prey to this vicious political system. Thus, the politicians play “politically mischievous” role. But it is to be considered as a mark of political weakness or degeneration.

*Riot* is neither a love story nor a tragedy; it is a polemic on contemporary Indian politics and history. It is a novel of unknowability of history. The way Tharoor has constructed the plot by imagining history perhaps is to highlight the unknowability of the truth. Most political conflicts in the twentieth century India have two aspects- the nationalist Movement clashing with the British and, the Hindu-Muslim encounters encouraged and masterminded by the British to serve their political purposes. Perhaps they believed in the dictum, “No riot, no Raj”. To serve their purpose, the British virtually divided the Hindus and Muslims, and encouraged the two-nation policy. The later and larger conflicts between the two communities are expressions of this British conspiracy, which is based on the policy of Divide and Rule. The conflicts are often engineered by the governmental actions, which implicitly proclaim, ‘there are bloods which do not mix’.

The historical discourse pursued by Tharoor is motivated by the central purpose of exposing many bitter truths in the political life of modern India. His attempt is to expose and ridicule all those people who have been responsible for the undoing of the nation- self-seeking and power-crazy, vindictive and treacherous traits, overtaking even the most wicked characters.
Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* (2003)

Githa Hariharan (1954) is one of the major contemporary Indian women novelists, well known for her experimental themes and techniques. She is an activist who is very much aware of the social and political anomalies of the contemporary Indian society, politics and culture. Her novels deal with contemporary burning issues such as freedom of expression, politics in the academia and communal violence, the rise of the *Hindutva* Brigade, social injustice, patriarchy and so forth. With the University Campus as a backdrop, Githa Hariharan takes up, an academic issue in her third novel *In Times of Siege*. It is a topical novel that discusses plainly and can be viewed as a response to the growing influence of Hindu fundamentalism in India. The novelist closely examines how the ‘freedom of expression’, one of the fundamental rights sanctioned by the constitution of India, is invariably under threat. The novel exposes the politics of academic life, where non-academic and un-academic activities take place and spoil the academic atmosphere. Universities are meant for free debate and plurality of opinions. Instead, they are marked by mistrust; indulge in caste-politics, religious-hatred, extremism, nepotism, suppression of intellectuals and censorship. Githa Hariharan attempts to prove that fundamentalists’ extremism is a perennial threat for academic freedom as well as for a civil society. Under such circumstances, the intellectual always has to live under constant threat of communal and ethnic violence.

*In Times of Siege* presents a typical world of Indian university milieu. Githa Hariharan handles the contemporary sensitive academic issues such as professional jealousy, (who are apparently friendly), mistrust, suppression of intellect, casteism, nepotism, politics, religion, opportunism, hatred, backstabbing, and infighting in a subtle
way. She also satirizes professional stereotypes, educational system at the higher level, and the problems of intellectuals in Higher Education and how religious fundamentalists have crept into academic circles and so on. Academic politics as well as the fundamentalism is “tearing apart the multicultural fabric of Indian society” (207). The author dedicates this novel to, “all those who speak up in times of siege”. Murthy, the protagonist of the novel becomes a mouthpiece of the author’s ideological position who ‘speaks up’ at the end.

The novel covers a span of two months in the life of Shiv Murthy, a middle-aged professor of History in the fictional Kasturaba Gandhi Central University, an open university in Delhi, “who no longer teaches students” but prepares lessons or ‘module’ for B.A. History students. Murthy’s life revolves around his wife and a daughter, who are now away from Delhi, in Seattle, in USA as his daughter has got a job there. His routine life, includes, Department meetings, preparing modules for students, along with an affair with a colleague, Amita Sen, as an escape from his routine conjugal life. Two unprecedented incidents disturb his quiet and routine life. First, his written module on Basava, a South Indian social reformer and a poet of the twelfth century, which draws the ire of right-wing political functionaries. Basava’s social emancipation and casteless society creates a sensation in the local paper and also reflects on his own Department of History. A group of self-proclaimed Hindu extremists, known as Itihasa Suraksha Manch, “a Hindu watch-dog group” (5), an independent social and cultural organization, opposes Shiv’s secular treatment of the lesson. The organization treats it as distortion and vandalizes his room. It seems illogical to Shiv, because he had prepared those modules five years ago. All of a sudden, the incident disturbs his mental peace. He is left alone to
face the religious Fundoos (fundamentalists), as his department colleagues do not come to his rescue at this crucial hour. Meena a twenty-four year old woman, a student activist, is pursuing her Ph.D. in a different university, happens to be the daughter of his friend, comes to stay with Murthy, as she had broken her leg. Till she gets recuperated, she stays with Murthy when his family is away.

Only Meena comes to Murthy’s rescue. Murthy, “an idealist” (154) as she calls, tries to negotiate personal passions and unexpected political exigencies. She forces him to take a political stance against the forces of ‘Hindutva’, as Hindu chauvinism, the increasing parochialism and jingoism are gaining an unprecedented foothold in the academia. As the novel unfolds with meticulous details, the fight between the Hindu fundamentalists and the secularists’ views of history, it leaves in the minds of the reader that the enormous power of Hindu fundamentalism which shapes any academic debate, and its ability to destabilize the fabric of a pluralist society like India. Githa Hariharan perhaps wants to draw attention to what essentially amounts to thought policing to dramatize the chilling implications of political control over intellectual freedom. The novelist does not spare the faculty members who were indifferent to the incidents and some of them wanted Murthy to be punished for his controversial writings of modules. The head of the Department, Dr. Sharma, a weak but practical person, has consensual approach to things, (always oscillating in his stands), Arya, a colleague and a Hindu chauvinist who manhandles Murthy, is the person behind all the untoward happenings. Dr. Lal and Amita Sen, his colleagues, who are close to Murthy, lend moral support. The Vice-chancellor who is depicted as a comic figure speaks more but conveys less. The novel reveals how persons holding responsible positions behave like buffoons. What
Githa Hariharan intends to say perhaps is that universities which were meant for free debates and plurality of opinions, do not provide space for open discussion and debates.

Dr. Sharma requests Murthy to tender an apology to the Manch. As the Media sensationalizes the issue, hate mails pour in and protests against Shiv are on the rise. The Manch in its press release note states, “We will not allow our history to be polluted like this. Fifty years after the independence, we cannot have Indian historian brainwashed by foreign theories and methods depriving us of our pride in Hindu temple and priests” (76). Anant Tripathi, the leader of the Manch observes that, Murthy’s lesson on Basava is part of a deep-rooted conspiracy to defame Hindu saints in particular and Hindu History and culture in general” (90). He also gives a call to revive Hindu courage: “We want to make the Hindu strong and courageous again” (90) puts three demands before the Head of the Department:

The first is an apology for hurting their sentiments… Second, lesson should be retracted and the material recalled from all the students registered for the course, and from the study centers and libraries. Third, the rewritten lesson should be submitted to the Manch before it is sent to our printing unit (69).

The Fundoos, as the novelist terms the religious fundamentalists, object to Murthy’s secular treatment of history. However, the Munch considers it as a religious subject. Ironically, the People, who are protesting, might not have read the modules prepared by Murthy five years ago. Perhaps his colleague to create trouble for Murthy might have intrigued through the Hindu fundamentalists who start creating problem all of
a sudden. Murthy is alleged that he has misrepresented Basava, the reformer poet, and has not given due credit to the past Hindu heritage, and this hurts the sentiments of a certain section of people.

Murthy is not heroic but a passive sufferer. Courage, strength and inspiration however, come to him in the form of a girl, Meena, whom Murthy helped in recuperating her leg. Meena, with the help of her radical friends protests against the Manch. She encourages Murthy to fight against the injustice in, “Obviously you can’t apologize or take back a word of the lesson” (55). At the end, Murthy tells the Department Head, “I will not apologize; I do not say anything about the other two demands, partly because they do not involve just me” (69). Murthy not only resists his antagonists, but also the timid university administration, which is ready to compromise its principles according to the situation and context. He is able to overcome his fears and obsession with Meena, who is a source and strength in his struggle. Githa Hariharan ends the novel with an optimistic note that even an ordinary man can be a hero if he remains true to himself. Murthy is an ardent follower of Basava because, his deceased father, a freedom fighter had inspired him to follow the footsteps of Basava and stand up for conviction. His father too disappeared in his middle age in the same way Basava did. The fascists did not create the grievance; they seized upon it, upturned it and forged from it a false sense of pride. They have mobilised human beings using the lowest common denominator religion.

Freedom of expression is one of the themes of In Times of Siege, which is under constant threat. Chauvinism and jingoism are obviously the cause and consequence of communal disturbance. Unexpected convulsions rising from severely uneven social developments are gripping the country. In recent times, they have come to signify self-
proclaimed superiority by one group over the other based on caste, language, region, religion and race. The religious supremacy of ‘isms’, divide people instead of uniting them. Being an intellectual and a social activist, Githa Hariharan, responds to the political and religious issues such as demolition of Babri Masjid, Gujrat Carnage, the murder of Australian Missionary, Graham Steins and his two innocent children, the RSS chief Madav Sadashiv Golwalkar for the glorification of Hindu race, Hindu and Muslim fundamentalist organizations and so on. Githa Hariharan compares the Hindu religious leaders to fascists of Germany who were responsible for the genocide. Through In Times of Seige, Githa Hariharan tries to reveal how fundamentalists’ extremism is a threat to the secular and democratic fabric of Indian society.

Rewriting the idea of a plural and secular India pitted against a ferocious image of communal and dominant forces constitutes a recurring theme in recent Indian English novels. Throughout the ages, the narrow-minded religious extremists have been responsible for a disproportionate share of the world's horrors. In the present age, as Githa Hariharan so adeptly explores, fundamentalist extremism can be a major threat to academic freedom, as well as to the civil society. Hence, such issues have more political reasons than religious ones. When religion is brought into every aspect of life, it would no doubt lead to the division of society into religious groups, resulting in communal violence. The extremist's real agenda is the suppression of any conflict in Indian history, historical revisionism, creating the illusion of a perfect, homogenous society. Their methods of bullying and intimidation are not an issue.

In Times of Seige is not without some shortcomings, as most of the views expressed in the novel appear attitudinal as the fundamentalism in other religions is not
looked at or taken into consideration. The threatening letters that are written to Murthy, one of the writers sponsored by Arya, his department colleague and religious chauvinist, questions:

Dear Sir, if the Muslims can have their fundamentalists, why can’t we? Have you forgotten that Hindus have stood the test of time like no one else? Our fundamentalists have been around longer than theirs have. So we have to show the world we are superior to them in every way (135).

Religious intolerance is a growing phenomenon which the Indian society and polity is facing. It took shape during the freedom movement due to British colonial politics. The British followed the policy of ‘divide and rule’, as they pitted one community against the other to maintain their dominance and ensure their survival. The force of British policy could be seen at Naukali in Bengal and in the border areas of India and Pakistan during partition which took toll of millions of people. The novelist targets only the Hindu fundamentalists who are responsible for the ethnic and religious disturbances and the destabilization of Indian democratic fabric. She does not look at the other side of fundamentalism that is Islamic fundamentalism, which appears to be more violent. Thus, *In Times of Seige* offers a critique of religious extremism. One can notice a similarity between *Hindutva* and Fascism: “The link between fascism and the ugly faces of *Hindutva* unveiling themselves around us is the regimentation of thought and brutal repression of culture” (101). Both fundamentalism and extremism would be perennial threat for academic freedom as well as freedom of expression. In such a situation, an individual must take a stand. Otherwise, it would be a great threat to the democratic and secular fabric of the country. In the end, one wonders whether strong resistance towards
fundamentalism and ‘speak up before it is too late’ attitude may inspire people in order to ensure no political and religious interference in the academic spheres.

Githa Hariharan takes up quite a different issue in her novel *In Time of Siege* unlike other women writers do. She dares to take up a controversial issue such as campus politics deliberately because perhaps she wants to expose the university politics along with the rising fundamentalist organizations in India. What inspired Githa Hariharn is a Kannada play *Mahachaitra* by H.S. Shivaprakash, which created controversy in Karnataka because the people of the state particularly one dominant community alleged that it hurt their feelings because of the distortion of the character Basavanna, the revolutionary social reformer of the twelfth century. The Government had to ban the book to pacify the protesters. Githa Hariharan tells what compelled her to write *In Times of Siege* in one of her interviews:

I was midway through my novel *In Times of Siege*. I was writing about a historian who is victimized by a group called the *Itihas Suraksha Manch* for a lesson he has written on the reformer-poet Basava. I felt a tremendous compulsion to write about what these sorts of *manchs* are doing to us. I wanted to write not about a specific aspect of the fundamentalism—or conservatism—we are seeing around us, but the insidious ways in which minds are being shrunk. This is why I set the novel in a university. The process of learning is supposed to break down walls and enlarge the student’s world, not shrink it by encouraging the irrational or reinforcing prejudice, or inculcating hatred of anything or anyone that is different from the self. Most of all, it is supposed to
encourage debate and disagreement. How do you learn to think for yourself if you swallow all the answer someone (and someone ill equipped) has cooked up for you. (Litcritt 6).

Incidentally, *In Times of Siege* is a perceptive critique of politics and of the anomalies of contemporary social and religious life. Thus, the novel deals with the complexities of a society, which is under continual threat of communal and ethnic violence. As the world in which we are living in, is changing rapidly. Mutual suspicion, arrogance, pride, no doubt has never brought happiness to man in his limited span of time. Thus, caste, region, religion, language, race, and ethnic chauvinisms have come into prominence and these have the capacity to polarize and divide people and nations. In spite of political unity and basic cultural oneness, the religious chauvinism has no doubt compartmentalized the social structure of India. It is in fact a constant regression even for the educated Indian society.

In this globalised world, the issue of belonging to a community and citizenship are subject to distortions driven by ignorance, chauvinism and bigotry. It is unfortunate that the contemporary world is facing violence and hatred in the name of religion, region, caste, language and race and so on. Religious fundamentalism and chauvinism are not a recent phenomenon in India and they are more active now in India than before. Self-proclaimed groups- such as moral police attempt to preserve their distinctive group identities and always try to retrieve the past beliefs and practices, which are considered by them, sacred. Even the ancient physical structures are becoming contested sites where memories are erased or re-mythified or new memories invented to target certain communities/ethnic groups. Religious places claimed by certain groups that they belong
to them and make people believe that such and such a place was the birthplace of such and such gods are creating anxiety and division in Indian society. For instance, *Ramjanamabhoomi*, Mathura, the birthplace of Krishna, *Ramasethu*, the natural bridge between India and Srilanka stand as a fine examples. Even the field of art is not free from the effects of fundamentalism. F.M. Husain had to quit India as the Hindu militant groups alleged that he had distorted the paintings of Hindu Goddesses. Movies like, *Fire*, and *Water* related to lesbianism, Rushdie’s *Satanic Verses*, Taslima Nazreen’s *Lajja*, Jaishree Misra’s *Rani* and others had to face the protest from the cultural, social and religious organizations, who claim themselves as cultural and moral police, and self proclaimed protectors of *Hinduism*. Consequently, the freedom of expression is curtailed as well as it is misused. Life has become more and more difficult for the creative writers and artists because everything appears to get politicized and artists have to articulate not only the bewilderment and pain of those who live through the times of siege but also have to look at the personal costs, the fears and confusions. But nobody has the courage to say ‘it is wrong’ in a democratic and secular country like India. Gita Hariharan dedicates this novel ‘to all those who speak up in times of siege’.

*In Times of Siege* is about the ruling political parties attempt to rewrite history and about revising the educational system through a Hindu slant. Universities exist partly for the sake of encouraging debates and a plurality of opinions but, Githa Hariharan questions: ‘How should one learn to think for oneself when expected only to regurgitate answers formulated already by others?’ The novel holds a mirror up to Indian society which is increasingly marked by fundamentalism, hate, mistrust and censorship. The author says that, ‘The land we are living in is falling apart’. The best word for describing
the state we are in is ´siege´. Our scope as citizens, writers, teachers and students, as rationally thinking people, is shrinking from day to day.

**Conclusion:**

Political novel explores the convergence of politics and human experience, attempting an inter-penetration of personal sentiments and political ideology. Politics in such novels integrates with the patterns of lives of the characters and functions as the human story. Post-Independence political situation of India proved to be a fertile ground for a number of literary talents. A close reading of the works of Amitav Ghosh, Shashi Tharoor, Githa Hariharan inspire the present research and other Indian English novelists reveal a common thread of creative sensitivity in the fictionalization of the political system in contemporary India. All these writers introduce novel/experimentalistic novelistic techniques in their eagerness to interrogate the prevalent political situation. They try to galvanize/stimulate the lethargic and slumberous Indian English fiction with their shocking negation/repudiation of existing paradigms of fictional writing. Thus, Amitav Ghosh’s *Sea of Poppies*, Tharoor’s *Riot: A Novel* and Githa Hariharan’s *In Times of Siege* represent a distinct form of political imagination attuned to the paradoxes of living under a totalitarian system. Each novelist employs his own technique in delineating the Indian experience more acutely felt than it has ever been before. These three novelists have tried to put into their transcendental kaleidoscope, the shifting scenes of the colonial and post-colonial Indian politics by employing innovative aesthetic strategies of demystification. They provide new dimensions to the understanding of the twenty-first-century Indian society and milieu.
Works Cited:


Atlantic Publisher and Distributor. 2006. Print.


Naik. M.K. *Dimensions of Indian English literature,* New Delhi, sterling publisher’s pvt. Ltd.).


*Riot: A Novel*. ([http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/divao504.htm](http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/divao504.htm)).


Tharoor, Shashi. Interview with Juhi Parikh. “You can’t feel the country’s pulse….”May, 2004, ([http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/divao504.htm](http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/divao504.htm)).

http://www.shashitharoor.in/mybookdetails.php?id=21


