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YASHPAL'S SOCIO-POLITICAL NOVELS: REVOLUTIONARY REALISM, GENDER, AND THE POLITICS OF FREEDOM

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ABSTRACT
This article reassesses Yashpal's socio-political novels as a sustained literary inquiry into the meanings and limits of freedom in twentieth-century India. Rather than treating the novels primarily as documentary records of anti-colonial politics, it argues that Yashpal expands the Hindi political novel by connecting national liberation to class relations, labor, caste hierarchy, gender, sexuality, communalism, and the contradictions of postcolonial nationhood. The study uses a comparative textual-historical approach to Dada Comrade, Deshdrohi, Geeta (originally Party Comrade), Divya, Manushya Ke Roop, Amita, Jhutha Sach, and Meri Teri Uski Baat, while engaging major biographical and critical scholarship on Yashpal and the Hindi public sphere. Three movements become visible across this corpus: an early concern with revolutionary organization and political ethics; the use of historical imagination to interrogate caste, patriarchy, and violence; and a later, broader critique of Partition, communalism, and the incomplete social realization of independence. Particular attention is given to women's agency and to the role of dialogue in staging ideological conflict. The article concludes that Yashpal's realism is best understood not as simple political advocacy but as a developing method for testing public ideals against intimate, social, and historical experience.

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Introduction

The Hindi novel of the first half of the twentieth century developed in a literary sphere increasingly shaped by nationalism, social reform, print culture, and mass politics. Orsini (2009) demonstrates how language, literature, and public debate became deeply intertwined in the Hindi public sphere between the 1920s and 1940s. Within that environment, political fiction was not merely a vehicle for representing public events; it also became a form through which writers tested competing ideas of community, social justice, citizenship, and modernity. Yashpal (1903-1976) occupies a distinctive position in this development because his literary career emerged directly from revolutionary activism while eventually extending far beyond the immediate concerns of underground anti-colonial politics.

Biographical scholarship has long emphasized the unusual proximity between Yashpal's political and literary lives. Friend (1977) situates him simultaneously as an anti-colonial activist and a writer committed to social justice, while later scholarship has stressed the importance of the revolutionary subject in his fiction (Govind, 2014). Yashpal's early engagement with the Non-Cooperation era gave way to participation in the Hindustan Socialist Republican Association and to imprisonment under colonial rule.

Yet it would be reductive to read his fiction as a transparent transcription of biography. His novels repeatedly transform political experience into problems of narrative form: who possesses freedom, how ideology enters private life, how gendered and classed subjects are authorized to act, and what happens when nationalist promises encounter social inequality.

This article argues that Yashpal's major socio-political novels progressively broaden the meaning of freedom. In the early revolutionary novels, freedom is tested through organization, discipline, labor struggle, and the ethics of political commitment. In the historical novels, freedom becomes inseparable from caste, gender, slavery, religious authority, and the legitimacy of violence. In *Jhutha Sach*, the achievement of political independence is placed beside the catastrophe of Partition, revealing the distance between national sovereignty and lived security. Across these phases, Yashpal's realism is therefore neither merely documentary nor simply doctrinaire. It is a critical method that brings political programs into confrontation with intimate relations, material conditions, and historical contradiction.

Research Context and Method

Critical approaches to Yashpal have often emphasized different dimensions of this political-literary relation. Malik (1975) treats contemporary Hindi political novels as important sites for interpreting ideology and public life. Govind (2014), by contrast, highlights the revolutionary figure as a problem of both political freedom and social or intimate relations, an approach especially productive for Yashpal because his fiction refuses to keep ideological commitment separate from sexuality, marriage, and gender. Dalmia (2019) situates the Hindi novel within the historical experience of the modern North Indian city and gives particular attention to the urban and national dislocations represented in *Jhutha Sach*. More recent scholarship has further sharpened the analysis of gendered violence and patriarchal control in the Partition novel (Singh, 2023) and of displacement and everyday place-making in its English translation (Saxena, 2022).

The present study brings these strands together through a comparative textual-historical analysis. Its primary corpus consists of *Dada Comrade* (1941), *Deshdrohi* (1943), *Divya* (1945), *Party Comrade* (1946; later published in English as *Geeta*), *Manushya Ke Roop* (1949), *Amita* (1956), *Jhutha Sach* (1958-1960), and *Meri Teri Uski Baat* (1974). Where English translations are available, their publication data are identified in the reference list. Because translation can reshape lexical, cultural, and stylistic effects, claims about translated texts are made with attention to the methodological caution raised by Siddiqui's (2022) study of the English translation of *Divya*. The analysis therefore focuses on recurring thematic and narrative structures rather than on unsupported assertions about individual Hindi words or stylistic minutiae.

A central premise of the study is that Yashpal's novels should not be divided too rigidly into 'political' and 'social' categories. His political plots are social because they ask how ideology reorganizes households, romantic attachments, occupations, and gender roles; his social plots are political because they expose the institutions that distribute dignity, labor, mobility, and power. This continuity explains why works as different as *Dada Comrade*, *Divya*, and *Jhutha Sach* can be read within a single developing project of critical realism.

From Revolutionary Activism to Literary Realism

Yashpal's revolutionary background is indispensable to the political vocabulary of his fiction, but it does not by itself explain the novels' literary importance. Friend (1977) shows that his career was shaped by anti-colonial activism, imprisonment, and a continuing concern with social justice. His fiction emerged from an environment in which revolutionary politics demanded decisions about secrecy, violence, sacrifice, organization, and loyalty. These problems reappear in the novels, yet they are rarely allowed to remain abstract. Instead, they become embodied in characters who must negotiate love, livelihood, family authority, sexuality, and unequal social status.

Yashpal's political orientation also requires precision. His work was strongly shaped by Marxist and socialist thought, and critics have repeatedly read his fiction in relation to class analysis and

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revolutionary politics (Govind, 2014; Malik, 1975). At the same time, it is misleading to collapse his literary position into formal party membership or to treat every novel as a fixed ideological program. His fiction often stages disagreement within the revolutionary camp itself and reveals the costs produced when political abstractions fail to account for individual vulnerability. This dialogic structure becomes especially important in the early novels and later develops into the much wider social panorama of *Jhutha Sach*.

Dada Comrade: Revolutionary Ethics and the Social Meaning of Freedom

Published in 1941, *Dada Comrade* is Yashpal's first novel and one of the clearest starting points for examining his transformation of revolutionary experience into fiction. The novel's protagonist, Harish, becomes dissatisfied with the limitations of secret armed resistance and moves toward forms of political action connected with workers and collective struggle (Yashpal, 1941/2022). That movement is important because it shifts the question of revolution from spectacular acts of sacrifice toward social organization. Freedom is no longer imagined only as the defeat of colonial authority; it must also have a material relation to labor and to the lives of ordinary people.

The novel's political debate is inseparable from its treatment of Shailbala. Her relationship with Harish, including the consequences of sexual intimacy and pregnancy, makes gender autonomy a test of revolutionary consistency (Yashpal, 1941/2022). A movement that speaks the language of emancipation but reproduces patriarchal control in private life remains internally contradictory. Govind's (2014) account of the revolutionary in the Hindi novel is particularly useful here: the revolutionary ideal is not confined to the public sphere but is tested in social and erotic relations. Yashpal consequently enlarges the political novel by making the body, marriage, and sexual morality part of the problem of freedom.

This feature also distinguishes *Dada Comrade* from a simple autobiographical document. The novel certainly draws on environments Yashpal knew, but its significance lies in the transformation of political biography into competing ethical positions. Dialogues and arguments enable characters to articulate conflicting understandings of violence, organization, loyalty, and social duty. Rather than functioning only as exposition, speech becomes a device for showing ideology under pressure.

Deshdrohi and Geeta: War, Party Politics, and Collective Action

Deshdrohi (1943) and *Party Comrade* (1946) continue Yashpal's engagement with organized politics while moving toward the tensions generated by war, nationalism, and party discipline (Friend, 1977). Written at different moments of late-colonial political crisis, the novels ask how revolutionary commitment changes when it encounters broader forms of collective organization. *Party Comrade*, later published in English as *Geeta*, foregrounds its woman protagonist and places political participation within urban and gendered social relations (Yashpal, 1946/2024).

The significance of *Geeta* lies in the way political awakening and women's emancipation are interwoven. Geeta's party work places her in a public sphere conventionally coded as masculine, while her interactions with men expose the persistence of possessiveness and gender hierarchy within ostensibly progressive environments. The novel's Bombay setting and its relationship to the political turbulence of the mid-1940s widen Yashpal's focus from the small revolutionary cell toward mass politics and urban mobilization. The question is no longer only whether an individual will join the struggle, but whether collective organizations can embody the equality they proclaim.

Taken together with *Dada Comrade*, these novels establish a recurring Yashpalian pattern: ideology is judged by its social consequences. Political commitment acquires moral credibility only when it transforms relations of class and gender rather than merely changing slogans or leadership. This is one reason the label 'political novel' should not be understood narrowly in Yashpal's case.

Historical Imagination in Divya and Amita

Yashpal's historical novels extend his political concerns by displacing them from the immediate context of anti-colonial struggle. *Divya* (1945) is set in ancient India, yet the historical setting functions less as antiquarian reconstruction than as a means of examining caste, slavery, religious authority,

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sexuality, and female autonomy. The narrative follows a woman whose social position changes drastically as she confronts patriarchal and hierarchical institutions (Yashpal, 1945/2009). The distance of the ancient setting enables Yashpal to expose domination as a social structure rather than as a problem limited to colonial rule.

The novel is therefore important to Yashpal's socio-political project precisely because it denies that national independence alone can define emancipation. A society may be politically sovereign and still reproduce caste and gender subordination. Divya's movement through sharply different social locations reveals how identity is produced by institutions and material circumstances. Siddiqui (2022) also reminds readers that the English translation of *Divya* mediates these social and cultural meanings, making careful attention to translation especially important when the novel is studied outside Hindi.

Amita (1956) similarly uses historical imagination to explore the morality of power. Its frame is connected with Ashoka's conquest of Kalinga, but Yashpal reshapes history through fiction in order to question violence, conquest, and the ethical obligations of rulers (Yashpal, 1956/1977). The child Amita's moral challenge to imperial violence introduces an apparently simple voice into a world governed by military power. The effect is not to turn the novel into a historical chronicle; it is to make the legitimacy of violence itself a political problem.

Read beside the revolutionary novels, *Amita* creates an important tension within Yashpal's oeuvre. His early political life is associated with revolutionary militancy, yet his literary imagination repeatedly subjects violence to ethical scrutiny. This does not amount to a simple return to Gandhian doctrine. Rather, the novel asks whether political transformation can be durable when it reproduces domination through coercion. Historical fiction thus becomes another method for testing the moral claims of politics.

Manushya Ke Roop: Social Mobility, Commodification, and Moral Contradiction

Manushya Ke Roop (1949) shifts the emphasis toward changing social identities and the material pressures that shape human conduct. Its central figures include Soma and Dhansingh, whose trajectories move through sharply different social locations. The novel's title itself directs attention to changing 'forms' of the human under social pressure (Yashpal, 1949/2009).

Soma's aspirations, her encounters with different social environments, and her changing relationships provide Yashpal with a structure for examining mobility, desire, and commodification. Rather than reducing her trajectory to a moralistic opposition between virtue and fame, the novel can be read as a critique of the conditions under which economic opportunity, sexuality, and respectability become exchangeable forms of social capital. Dhansingh's own political and economic uncertainties further complicate any stable distinction between the morally pure individual and a corrupt society.

The novel thereby develops a theme already visible in *Dada Comrade*: individuals do not possess fixed moral identities outside social relations. Their choices are constrained and redirected by work, money, gender norms, and access to institutions. This dynamic is central to Yashpal's realism because it treats character not as an isolated psychological essence but as a changing product of material and ideological environments.

Jhutha Sach: Partition, Communalism, and the Crisis of Independence

Yashpal's most ambitious engagement with the relationship between national politics and ordinary life is *Jhutha Sach*, a two-volume novel originally published in 1958 and 1960 and translated into English as *This Is Not That Dawn* (Yashpal, 1958-1960/2010). Its two-volume structure is integral to the temporal breadth of its response to independence and Partition. The novel's large social canvas has encouraged epic-scale readings; more importantly, its breadth allows public history to be refracted through multiple households, institutions, and social locations (Trivedi, 2010).

The novel follows interconnected lives across the violent reorganization of social space produced by Partition. Its Lahore and Delhi settings allow national history to be experienced through homes, streets, workplaces, refugee movement, political debate, and intimate relationships. Dalmia (2019) reads the

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modern North Indian city as a crucial site where fiction and history meet, and *Jhutha Sach* is a particularly powerful example because the city is not merely a background. Urban space records the breakdown of trust, the movement of populations, and the effort to reconstruct everyday life after displacement.

Saxena (2022) develops this dimension by examining displacement and the everyday making of 'home' in the English translation. The novel's political force lies partly in its refusal to let Partition remain a distant constitutional event. Borders become material through lost houses, insecure bodies, interrupted relationships, and changed possibilities of work. Independence is therefore represented as a historically necessary achievement whose meaning is simultaneously fractured by communal violence and mass displacement.

Gender is equally central to this critique. Singh (2023) shows how *Jhutha Sach* exposes masculinist ideals, gendered violence, and patriarchal control while giving its female characters forms of strategic agency. Tara's experience, in particular, makes clear that the freedoms promised by nationalist politics are not distributed equally. The vulnerability of women during communal violence and within domestic structures reveals a fundamental contradiction: a nation may celebrate sovereignty while many of its citizens remain subject to coercion within family and community.

The relationship among Tara, Jaidev Puri, Asad, and the wider network of characters also enables Yashpal to examine the instability of secular and progressive self-identification. Characters may profess universal principles yet behave differently when religious identity, marriage, reputation, or family authority is at stake. The novel's realism is especially effective here because contradiction is dramatized through conduct rather than resolved by authorial declaration.

For this reason, *Jhutha Sach* marks a development beyond the more programmatic structure of some early political fiction. The political field has become too extensive to be embodied in a single exemplary revolutionary. Instead, multiple characters, institutions, and social spaces generate a dispersed critique of communalism, class privilege, patriarchy, opportunism, and postcolonial disappointment. The title's paradox - the 'false truth' - is appropriate to a novel preoccupied with the gap between public narratives of freedom and the unstable realities through which freedom is lived.

Meri Teri Uski Baat and the Retrospective Politics of the Freedom Struggle

Yashpal's final major novel, *Meri Teri Uski Baat*, was published in 1974 and received the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976 (Sahitya Akademi, n.d.; Yashpal, 1974). Set primarily against the political atmosphere of the 1920s through the 1940s, the novel looks back on the national movement from the perspective of a writer whose own career had already traversed revolution, independence, Partition, and postcolonial disillusionment.

The novel's retrospective quality allows Yashpal to revisit the freedom struggle without treating it as a single unified experience. Political commitment appears in different ideological and social forms, while personal choices remain entangled with religion, family, profession, and marriage. The interreligious dimension of Amarnath's life, for example, gives concrete form to the problem of whether political nationalism can coexist with inherited social boundaries. In this sense, the final novel returns to a question present from *Dada Comrade* onward: what kind of social transformation must accompany political freedom if independence is to alter everyday life?

The Sahitya Akademi recognition of *Meri Teri Uski Baat* is significant not simply as an honor but as evidence of Yashpal's continuing literary importance near the end of his career. By this stage, the revolutionary novel has become retrospective and plural. It evaluates a historical movement through accumulated experience rather than through the urgency of immediate underground action.

Narrative Method: Dialogue, Realism, and Political Characterization

Across Yashpal's fiction, dialogue occupies a central structural role. Conversations, debates, and speeches do more than provide exposition: they place political positions in conflict and allow events to test

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what characters say they believe. Ideology is thus dramatized rather than merely announced. A character's speech is not necessarily the author's final judgment; it is one position within a field of competing claims.

This method helps explain why Yashpal's realism should not be reduced to the accumulation of social detail. Ushakumari (2021) emphasizes psychological dimensions in Yashpal's novels, while Govind (2014) demonstrates the importance of linking political ideals to social relations. Together these perspectives point toward a realism that works simultaneously at material, ideological, and psychological levels. Characters are placed under pressure by institutions and historical events, but they also interpret those pressures, rationalize their behavior, and often reveal discrepancies between principle and action.

Women are especially important to this narrative method. Shailbala, Geeta, Divya, Soma, Amita, Tara, and other female characters are not interchangeable symbols of virtue or victimhood. They occupy different class and historical positions and confront different structures of authority. What connects them is Yashpal's recurring interest in the extent to which political emancipation can remain meaningful when women lack autonomy over marriage, sexuality, labor, public participation, or bodily security. Singh's (2023) analysis of *Jhutha Sach* shows the maturity of this critique in the Partition context, but its foundations are visible much earlier.

Yashpal's relationship to realism consequently develops over time. The early novels are often closer to explicitly organized ideological debate; the historical novels use temporal distance to expose durable structures of domination; and *Jhutha Sach* expands toward a broad, multi-character social panorama. The continuity lies in the testing of ideals against lived conditions. Political claims become credible only when they survive contact with class inequality, gender hierarchy, communal identity, labor, and the contingencies of ordinary life.

Conclusion

Yashpal's socio-political novels constitute a sustained examination of freedom rather than a sequence of isolated political themes. From *Dada Comrade* through *Meri Teri Uski Baat*, political liberation is repeatedly placed in relation to social structures that may survive a change of regime. Labor exploitation, caste hierarchy, patriarchal authority, sexual regulation, religious division, and communal violence all become measures of whether freedom has entered everyday life.

The development of Yashpal's fiction is therefore best understood as an expansion of revolutionary realism. The early novels interrogate political organization and the ethics of revolutionary commitment. *Divya* and *Amita* use historical imagination to show that domination is not reducible to colonialism and that violence requires continuing ethical scrutiny. *Manushya Ke Roop* explores the instability of identity under economic and social pressure. *Jhutha Sach* then brings these concerns together on the largest scale by confronting the nationalist promise of independence with Partition, displacement, communalism, class difference, and gendered violence.

This trajectory also clarifies Yashpal's place in the Hindi novel after Premchand. His importance need not be established through a hierarchical ranking of writers; it rests on a demonstrable literary achievement: he made political ideas answerable to social experience. Through argumentative dialogue, changing social environments, historically situated characters, and persistent attention to women's autonomy, Yashpal transformed the political novel into a form capable of criticizing both colonial power and the inequalities reproduced within nationalist and postcolonial society.

Future scholarship can extend this argument through closer comparison of Hindi editions and translations, especially where translational choices affect caste, gender, political vocabulary, and register. Such work would also help distinguish more precisely between Yashpal's authorial idiom and the interpretive effects produced by English translation. Even with that necessary caution, the novels considered here show a coherent and evolving critical project: freedom, for Yashpal, becomes meaningful only when it can be recognized in the structures and relationships of ordinary life.

ISSN: 2181-3337 | SCIENTISTS.UZ

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