

POLITICS AND NOVEL: AN ECLECTIC READING OF MANIZA NAQVI'S NOVELS

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ABSTRACT

In countries like Pakistan, due to a number of reasons, people take keen interest in politics. This finds reflection in literature. The present study examined the portrayal of the Pakistani politics, especially, the imposition of different martial laws with their disastrous consequences for the country, its people and culture by Maniza Naqvi in her novels. The novels included in the study were *Mass Transit*, *Stay with Me* and *On Air*. The research methodology was based upon the analysis of the texts of the novels in the light of a combination of critical approaches like New Criticism, Marxism and Postcolonial theory. The study proved its major proposition that politics is responded to by writers, for the pivotal and central role it plays in the lives of the people. The study also found that novels of Naqvi are comparable to Postcolonial novels from other cultures and countries, in their response to politics. The study found that Naqvi takes a pro-people approach while portraying the Pakistani politics.

KEYWORDS: Politics and Novel, Literature, Marxism and Postcolonial Theory.

INTRODUCTION

Portrayal of politics in the novel has been examined by many critics in different contexts. Irving Howe has dealt with the handling of politics by nineteenth and twentieth century European and American novelists, in *Politics and Novel*. Howe shows that novelists like Stendhal, Dostoevsky, Joseph Conrad, Henry Adam, and Henry James have responded to political ideas and events in their novels due to the important role politics plays in the lives of the people.

The Anglo-Indian novel absorbed and portrayed politics during the early part of the twentieth century, because the Indian politics affected the British and their empire in the real sense of the word, though the Anglo-Indian novel mirrored the political reality from the perspective of the colonizers. Bhupal Singh has taken account of the portrayal of Indian politics by Anglo-Indian novel in the beginning of the twentieth century, in *A Survey of Anglo-Indian Novel*.

Ralph J. Crane has also dealt with the portrayal of politics by Anglo-Indian and Indian novelists, in his study, *Inventing India*. These include John Maters (*Night Runners of Bengal*) and M.M.Kay_ (*Shadow of the Moon*), *The Siege of Krishnapur* by Farrell, Paul Scott (*Raj*

Quartet), R.K. Nayran (*Waiting for the Mahatma*) and Raja Rao (*Kanthapura*). Richard Cronin in *Imagining India* has done the same.

A Bangla Deshi scholar, Niaz Zaman has also taken account of the portrayal of Partition of India in 1947 and the accompanied politics, by Indian and Pakistani novelists, in her book, *A Divided Legacy*. Some of the novelists discussed are Khuswant Singh (*Train to Pakistan*), Mumtaz Shah Nawaz and Mehr Nigar Masroor (*Shadows of Time*)

In addition to Naqvi Pakistani writers like Sidhwa and Mohsin Hamid also believe in the centrality of politics to the lives of the people and its ultimate portrayal in literature. Sidhwa in *An American Brat* contends that, “in Pakistan, politics, with its special brew of Martial Law and religion, influenced every aspect of day to day living” (11). She further adds:

In Pakistan, politics concerned everyone --- from the street sweeper ` to the business tycoon --- because it personally affected everyone, particularly women, determining how they should dress, whether they could play hockey in school or not, how they should conduct themselves even within the four walls of their homes.(171)

Hamid believes personal and political to be like inhaling and exhaling, the two sides of the same reality (Hamesh Hamilton).

Emma Duncan in *Breaking the Curfew*, expresses similar views and says, “ Change and uncertainty keep people riveted to their politics” (199). She further adds about Pakistan and its people:

More than anywhere I have been--- Much more than India---its people worry about the state of their country. They wonder what went wrong; they fear for the future. They condemn it; they pray for it. They are involved in the nation’s public life as passionately as in their small private dilemmas... A chatty hotel waiter sat down with us to share a bottle of local whiskey. My friend asked him questions about his family; I about the dead president. I won hands down. (6)

Interestingly Dr. Tariq Rehman in his book *A History of Pakistani Literature in English* comes up with something different. He contends that except for a few Indian works, like, Raja Rao’s *Kanthapura* (1938) Narayan’s *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and Khushwant Singh’s *Train to Pakistan* (1956), the Indian literature in English has hardly responded to Indian political events (224). He further adds that Pakistani literature in English has not dealt with major political events like the philosophy of Partition, imposition of various martial laws, the 1971 war, the execution of an ex-prime minister of Pakistan (225-27).

Rehman further adds that in Pakistani literature in English there is even less response to history than there is in Indian literature. (224) .Rehman acknowledges a limited reference to the political events surrounding Partition, by some Pakistani writers, but he adds, “ However,

the point I want to make is that there is little response to political events and that is different from African and West Indian literatures”(2224).

Rehman contends that Pakistani writers failed to respond to the imposition of martial law by General Zia-ul-Haq:

The martial law of General Zia-ul-Haq was resented by liberal and leftist intellectuals in Pakistan. However, the resentment was expressed in occasional poems in English and in short stories of symbolic kind. There was no major response to this great event by Pakistanis writing in English. Even the hanging of Bhutto, the ex-prime minister of the country, did not produce any response in English. (227).

Rehman concludes his book with a statement that Pakistani fiction in English is not political sophisticated or even realistic. This is a serious misunderstanding on the part of Rehman about Pakistani Literature/ novel in English. This needs to be addressed to and replaced with a correct analysis and interpretation of Pakistani novel in English This indicates the justification and potential of the present study. The proposition of the present study is that in countries like Pakistan, people take politics very seriously, and it is portrayed by the novelists. The present study intends to investigate the portrayal of politics by Maniza Naqvi in her three novels i.e. *Mass Transit*, *Stay with Me* and *On Air* . The proposition of the study is that Naqvi has responded to Pakistani politics for the central role politics plays in the lives of the people. The research methodology for the study is the analysis of the texts of the novel in the light of an eclectic critical approach, consisting of New Criticism, Marxism and Postcolonial theory, especially New Criticism with its emphasis upon the text as presented by Lois Tyson (Critical Theory Today, 136)

DISCUSSIONS AND ANALYSIS

Maniza Naqvi, a Pakistani English language novelist, believes events like the Partition, the two wars with India, the Afghan war, martial laws especially that of General Zia, the execution of an elected prime minister, have left an indelible impact upon people and the country. These political developments have affected the people; therefore, Pakistani writers cannot stay uninvolved with politics (*The News*, August 29, 2004). Naqvi in her novels, *Mass Transit*, *Stay with Me* and *On Air* has incorporated the different aspects of the Pakistani politics, especially the consequences of martial laws upon Pakistani society.

Maniza begins her novel *Mass Transit* with a reference to the hypocrisy of Zia regime when discriminatory laws were passed to victimize the poor and the women. They were punished in the name of religion under the Hudood Ordinances, while the ruling class enjoyed chivas regal served by white-gloved waiters. The government of General Zia and the feudal ruling class are condemned by Naqvi, for unleashing the rein of terror and torture against the

activists of political parties opposing the Zia regime and for introducing the Hudood Ordinances. She asks, “isn’t that illegal? Against the law, their laws, against our law in this land of so many laws, this land of so many courts, so many judges, so many ministers” (ix). Naqvi portrays the nexus between the superior judiciary and the dictators and voices her strong disapproval of some members of the top judiciary who always defended the abrogation of the constitution by martial law authorities and provided it invariably with a safe passage (x).

Naqvi, like what Sidhwa does in *An American Brat*, shows that women, especially belonging to lower classes were the worst victims of Hudood Ordinances issued by General Zia, which prescribed the punishment of stoning to death for adultery. Naqvi raises the question of the definition of adultery (zina). “Adultery, lets stone a woman to death for zina (adultery) what the hell is zina? Who are the prostitutes in this country? Who go to the highest bidders? Who compromise principles, isn’t that zina” (x). In *Mass Transit* Naqvi gives expression to her anger against the ruling class for showing scant regard for the laws they themselves have passed and for their hypocrisy and selfishness. Naqvi condemns them for their willingness to sell their conscience, convictions, and loyalties to the highest bidders. She uses very strong language for the rulers. She cannot forget the help extended by the feudal ruling class to the dictators to pass anti-women laws in Pakistan (ix). Rushdie an Indian writer has also responded to Pakistani politics, especially the Zia era, in his novel *Shame* and has mirrored the repressive measures undertaken by Zia regime (248-49).

In *Mass Transit*, Naqvi is extremely disappointed that even after decades of getting independence from colonizers; the real independence still eluded Pakistan and its people. She is dismayed that the country was often in the grip of dictators. The real participation of the people in the decision making process was denied. Naqvi shows that out of forty years of independence, Pakistan has groaned for twenty-four years under martial law in the name of control and discipline. She holds frequent martial laws responsible for drugs, gun running, violence and riots in the streets, bomb explosions, curfews and the civil war in former East Pakistan. Naqvi shows that martial laws result in the denial of the rights of people (12). These are all very serious issues. These affect people, their country, and culture. She shows that the banishment of political parties and political process had divided the country into smaller ethnic and regional groups fighting and killing each other. Naqvi reflects the direct impact of martial laws and its policies upon the people and therefore her portrayal of politics in her novels. She shows that the first Afghan war affected the Pakistani society politically and economically. This converted the country into war zones. Naqvi shows that the wrong policies of the dictators divided the country into two broader classes, the rulers and the ruled:

Forty-one years of independence and forty-one years of steadily increasing lies, deceptions, and out right, outrageous contempt for the ideals which we thought we had founded this country on...Kalashnikovs in the streets, curfews. (10)

Naqvi in *Mass Transit* portrays the typical excuse of the dictators and their allies to intervene in civilian matters. Doud is one such man. He holds the politicians responsible for mucking the things up. Doud blames the politicians for inviting the army to intervene due to the mess they make of everything. Doud further blames the politicians for chaos, corruption, nepotism, and discord. Doud believes the civilians jeopardize the very security and the unity of the country. He comes up with a fine solution to end the street violence in Karachi or for that matter in Pakistan, by favouring more stringent measures on the part of martial law authorities. Doud says:

This blessed mother land, sir, has always been under threat from outside forces, with their devious ways, like invisible hands, that keep creating mischief amongst us. We must be warned of their presence amongst us, and be vigilant of them. The nation is too young to take care of itself. It needs to be defended by strong control and discipline. (12)

His arguments are not different from those of the nineteenth century British imperialists and mirrored by Anglo-Indian novelists and discussed by Bhopl Singh. Through the technique of multiple narratives, Naqvi facilitates the reader to arrive at the truth. Naqvi blames the martial law regimes for subjecting the students, doctors, poets to persecution and torture in the name of security, unity and integrity of the country (18). Since politics affects people in a real and substantial way, this is why, Naqvi maintains, people discuss politics instead of discussing art, drama and dance (57).

Naqvi is of the opinion that interest in art and literature becomes difficult while living in the shadows of death, destruction and strife (59). Naqvi is strongly critical of the dictatorships because she associates the tyranny with violation of human rights, murders and repression. Naqvi shows how Humayun, a student activist, was murdered by state agencies during an earlier martial law for protesting against the imposition of martial law (62). Naqvi blames Zia for exploiting religion for his political objectives (70). She shows that Zia's brand of Shariat promoted narrow-mindedness and repression especially against women (171).

Naqvi in *Mass Transit* seems to show signs of hope and optimism at the emergence and rise of new leadership in Pakistan. She probably had MQM and Benazir in her mind, while she talks about the new political leadership in Pakistan. She uses the city of Karachi as a microcosm, representing the whole of Pakistan. She expects the new political leadership of Pakistan to address the genuine grievances of the people and to work for their resolution. She ascribes the rise of the new political leadership in Pakistan to the decades of deprivation, neglect and resource strangulation by the alliance of feudal rulers and establishment (149-50). In *Mass Transit*, she mentions only Benazir by name. She seems to pin her hopes and faith in Benazir. Naqvi shows a group of women sitting cross-legged in a semi circle, breast-feeding their children, while listening to Benazir at a public rally (135). The scene has its symbolic

importance. For her, Benazir is a symbol of peace and security, and future of Pakistan. The children are shown comfortable in the laps of their mothers, while the mothers are listening to the speech of Benazir. Naqvi suggests the chadder-clad figure of Benazir is reflective of her regard and commitment to the cultural and social values of Pakistani society. Unfortunately, Benazir became victim of terrorism and died in December, 2007.

The new political leadership of Pakistan is praised in the beginning by Naqvi for their resolve to change the old order, consisting of the establishment and the corrupt feudal ruling class who squandered national resources for their own personal aggrandizement (149). She shows the excitement of the people, at the prospects of change and makes Safina say:

A new order was dawning; they were its inheritors, this young and vibrant band of leaders who would remain committed to them and the city. She looked around at the jubilant people, young and old alike, whose faces showed clearly how deeply they believed in the sincerity of this message. (150)

However, towards the end of the novel Naqvi is overtaken by disappointment even with the young political leadership of Pakistan. She is critical of some cadres of the new political leadership of Pakistan. Naqvi feels that such undemocratic practices on the part of some elements may transform the new political leadership into a tyranny, thus, extinguishing all the “diyas” (lamps) of hope and shattering the beautiful dreams about future. Naqvi is also critical of the new representatives of Pakistan, for siding with the forces of status-quo. Therefore, through Safina in *Mass Transit* Naqvi expresses her sense of disillusionment with new leadership. Safina is dismayed and disappointed that actually nothing of substance is going to change. It is only a change of guards:

Every thing was exactly the same, religion being used for politics, funds being used for power, and the people being used for fodder. Every thing was exactly the same, only this time even her dreams had been used and squandered and hope had left forever and circles after circle of barricades seemed to engulf her. (181)

The cause of Naqvi’s grief and sorrow is that she observes that all those who were pointed out as feudal lords and religious exploiters are again seen sitting next to those who have won the country’s heart and confidence (181). Naqvi is quite unhappy at this and she is quite discouraged and disappointed (182). Naqvi is grieved that the young representatives of Pakistan have succumbed to forces of status-quo and they have found themselves making alliances with obscurantist groups and the exploiters of the people. Basit Haqqani in *Papio* also focuses upon the alliance between feudal and the dictators for the objectives (278,299). The discussion shows that Naqvi has responded to the Pakistani politics due to the impact it has on the lives of the people as she makes clear in her interview (*News*, August 29, 2004). While

responding to Pakistani politics, she takes pro-people and liberal stance. She condemns the martial law regimes for the repression and the violation of the rights of the people.

Stay With Me, by Naqvi, is the most hard-hitting novel against the repressive regimes in Pakistan. In this novel she deals with the repression and persecution exercised by the dictatorships in Pakistan with disastrous fall out for the country and the people. Naqvi expresses her sense of outrage and protest at the violation of the rights of people by the martial law regimes. She mirrors the preferences of the martial law regimes for torture and violence to achieve their objectives. Naqvi, in *Stay With Me* raises her strong voice against the brutality and violence perpetrated by the dictators. Naqvi produces the standard speech delivered by every dictator at the time of the takeover, with usual rhetoric:

At the stroke of dawn, one week ago, Destiny beckoned, the blessed homeland called its patriotic sons, to once again serve its need. At that hour, I had reported to you that the homeland was safe, and I made a promise to you, my dear country men fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, my children. I had promised you that we would always remain loyal servants and that we would safe guard this sacred soil to the last breath. (76)

Naqvi mirrors the dictators' condemnation of the politicians for being irresponsible, and arrogant. The dictators blame the civil governments for bringing the country to the brink of economic and social collapse. Naqvi is disappointed that the dictators label the civil political set up as the cancer for the nation and the country, to be removed, by the "saviours of the people" (76). Naqvi in *Stay With Me* refers to the rhetoric and pet words of the martial law authorities, like the hour of crisis, history in the making, service and duty to the nation, integrity, honesty, transparency and finally accountability of the politicians to mislead and deceive the people (53). She realistically portrays the attempts of the martial law authorities to present to the world a civilian façade to hide behind. She exposes the nature of the claims made by the dictatorial regimes for the restoration of order, decency, the constitution and democracy. Naqvi points out that even the elections are promised to hoodwink the public opinion and deceive the international community. Actually, they pick up a pliant figure with an acceptable face:

In the mean time, we have searched the world, to find a patriot to head the country's interim government. Cast, creed, gender and ethnicity are not our concern. We are proud to tell you that we have convinced a decent, honest, intellectual human being with a vision, to lead you, someone that all of you admire and can be proud of to take up the position. (77)

Like a liberal and progressive writer, Naqvi is skeptical of the promises of the restoration of democracy by the dictators. She rejects the claims of the dictatorial regimes to wipe out corruption. Naqvi in *Stay with Me* shows that the martial law authorities do not want

to transfer the power to the civilians (36). She reflects the helplessness of the civilian prime minister who is not allowed to deviate from the set policies of the martial law authorities. The civil prime minister cannot question, for example, the defence policy or budget. If he asks such questions, he risks being labeled as a security risk or even a traitor (38). The civilian figure head is meant to function as a show piece for the outer world (39). In *Stay With Me*, Naqvi also focuses upon the attempts of the dictators to bring the judiciary under its influence and control. The dictators never allow the superior judiciary to function independently. "The supreme court and other courts will continue to function as long as they don't contradict us" (91). Naturally this approach affects the country and the people who are denied justice under dictatorships. Naqvi shows that any attempts on the part of the civilian partners to differ are crushed severely. The dictators never allow the undoing of the amendments in the constitution which may reduce the role and the power of the dictator (93). She shows the true nature of things in *Stay With Me*:

You cannot change what we have worked so hard to establish. If you ask why, you are a traitor. You are a traitor if you question it. You cannot question it. You cannot change it. If you try, we will wipe you out. But first we will establish you as a criminal. Every thing you will accuse us of, we will accuse you of, and hang you with it. (96)

Naqvi makes it very clear that the civilian façade is not a power sharing. It is a cover up, to deceive the world community. She suggests that under dictators even the parliament is not more than a rubber stamp, because it is the privilege of the dictator to abrogate the constitution and not that of the parliament to change it (127). Naqvi shows that the dictators in Pakistan have absolute power and control over the state machinery, therefore resistance on the part of the civilians can be crushed through repression and cruelty (28).

The real nature of the apparent peace and quiet under martial law is exposed by Naqvi. She shows that it is achieved through draconian measures like torture, imprisonments, even killings, thereby transmitting fear among the general public. Naqvi shows that under martial law regimes everybody is frightened. In this atmosphere of insecurity and fear for one's own life and that of one's children, the protests by the people are out of question (52). Naqvi in *Stay With Me* shows that the civil-military coalition is artificial, unnatural and therefore incompatible. Even the most pliant and hand picked civilian politicians fall from grace. She suggests that the Pakistanis are familiar with this model. Naqvi chooses not to name either the dictator or civilian figurehead in the novel. She adds that after his/her fall from grace; ex-prime minister is arrested, tortured and tried. This is a familiar story for Pakistanis. According to Naqvi, the one time claps of applause turn into slaps on face (45). The ex-prime minister is accused of treason and of instigating rebellion. Instead of the prime minister's house he is taken around at places like, Attock Fort, Lahore Fort, Rawal Pindi Jail, Kot Lakpat, all notorious places for torture and brutality (64). Naqvi suggests that the world of a dictator is characterized by raw absolute power. The fallen politicians are accused of being the agent of

the enemy, looking outside the country for support. They are accused of instigating protests, boycotts and sanctions (152). Naqvi praises the civil society for protesting against the martial law regimes in spite of the cruelty, the torture and repression of the dictators. She records that people call the dictators as thieves, usurpers, murderers, trespassers, rapists (139-40). The discussion shows the relevance of politics to the people and its reflection in the writings of Naqvi.

The martial law regimes are condemned by Naqvi for being extremely intolerant of the difference and dissention. Therefore, children of the nation, Aman and Iman, metaphors for peace and integrity cannot survive in this brutal atmosphere. While the dictators desperately seek to justify themselves and their actions with familiar catch phrases: patriotism, homeland, stability even freedom. In *Stay With Me*, Naqvi portrays her views against dictatorial regimes for their use of violence and torture against the general public to perpetuate their rule. She proves her credentials as a liberal, progressive and pro-people writer(159). Javid Amir in *Modern Soap* has also exposed the nature of the dictatorships ,and the repression and cruelty experienced by the people under them.

Naqvi in her novel, *On Air*, presents the reasons for the keen interest people in Pakistan take in politics. She suggests that politics is the most important thing in the lives of the people in Pakistan (45). She begins *On Air*, with an indirect reference to the arrests and killings and massacres which take place in the country during a martial law regime, describing it only as the "sensitive stuff" (5). In *On Air*, Naqvi also associates the dictatorships with repression, and the denial of the freedom of speech and action, which in her opinion is like killing a human being, which reflects her liberal and democratic views (12). Naqvi shows that the dictators are like colonizers and they distort the psyche of the nation in addition to the killings and the crackdowns under taken by them. She expresses her point of view on the nature of dictatorships:

When a people are suddenly taken over, their rules and traditions over turned by invading conquerors, when they are made to do things they never wanted to do, when they can no longer exercise their will and are made to do things against their will, when their will is broken, when their heroes are humiliated and when their mythologies are desecrated and ridiculed, when all this happens, do they become ashamed individuals? Do they become ashamed societies, say like, a person who as a child had been abused, molested and beaten, abandoned or humiliated? (88).

The time tested excuse of the dictators for toppling the civilian governments in Pakistan is depicted by Naqvi in *On Air*. The dictators sight the infighting in the ruling party, the allegations of corruption and the inability of the government to resolve the financial crisis in the country (101). Naqvi reflects that dictators and their cronies from amongst the

bureaucracy and feudal lords, themselves do the same on a larger scale and buy expensive properties around the world. These cronies of the dictators and the beneficiaries of their regimes appear in the talk shows and defend the dictators and claim that only they can save Pakistan and the entire world from a terrible scourge like fundamentalism that would have taken civilization into the Dark Age (106).

The West is blamed by Naqvi in *On Air*, for its double standards. She shows that whenever it suits the interests of the West; they support and defend dictators in Pakistan. The West ignores all the repression, cruelty, killings and massacres, unleashed by the dictators on the people. She shows that dictators in Pakistan kill innocent people, who oppose their regimes in the name of eradicating fundamentalism (108). She warns the world community that those who perished during the dictatorships are not necessarily the terrorists. They might be the ones who struggled for equality, justice and the eradication of poverty. She further shows that the fundamentalism is the extension of the first Afghan war, when another dictator opened and organized training camps, with the help of the West, to recruit freedom fighters for the first Afghan war. She reflects the fall out of the first Afghan war for Pakistan and its people:

So you had the Mujahideen to begin with and later on the Taliban. The flush of funds raised the level of corruption in the country, and finally we see the effect of all of this on Karachi and on the rest of the country, the Western flanks now borderless with Afghanistan, the entire country flushed with refugees, drugs, guns and over night millionaires who are smugglers and warlords. (44)

The dictators in Pakistan, Naqvi shows, use the campaigns to eradicate fundamentalism to perpetuate their own rule:

I will drag Pakistan kicking and screaming into the twenty first century. I will turn it into a model of success and dynamism. There is no place for fundamentalism in this country. Wherever I find it, I will uproot it and eradicate it. (111)

She fears a new wave of repression in the name of war against fundamentalism. Naqvi in her novels incorporates the repression and the violation of human rights under martial law regimes because this affects the people in a real and substantial way.

CONCLUSIONS

The study has proved its major proposition that politics is responded to by writers in countries like Pakistan, where institutions are not fully developed and the future of the country is not safe, people take keen interest in politics because it affects their day to day lives in a massive way. The study has shown that Naqvi in her novels has portrayed different aspects of Pakistani politics, especially, the imposition of different martial laws. She has portrayed the

repression and cruelty perpetrated by the dictators and the resistance put up by people. She is also critical of the West for supporting the dictators. The study has shown that politics in countries like Pakistan affects people in a substantial way and is responded to by writers like Naqvi. It has further shown that Naqvi has a liberal, progressive, pro-people approach while dealing with the politics of Pakistan in her novels. Naqvi does not support the martial law regimes. In her novels she has projected the democratic values, basic human rights, sanctity of constitution and respect for justice and fair play.

The study has further shown that Naqvi like a postcolonial writer has privileged Pakistan, its people, their problems, their fears and aspirations in her works. The study has confirmed Naqvi's status as a postcolonial writer. The study has also challenged the contention of Dr. Tariq Rehman that Pakistani novel is neither politically sophisticated nor it has responded to politics. The has shown that Pakistani writers like Naqvi have responded to Pakistani politics in a massive way, because it matters to the people.

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Total Editing Time: 10 Minutes
Last Printed On: 8/21/2012 6:41:00 PM
As of Last Complete Printing
Number of Pages: 12
Number of Words: 4,980 (approx.)
Number of Characters: 28,386 (approx.)