

## The Politik of a Generation: Modern Indian Political Milieu in Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* (2023)

Dr Sherly Winfred C. R<sup>1</sup>   P. Antony Maria Jenobhar<sup>2</sup>  

### Abstract

*Devika Rege's Quarterlife (2023) stands out as one of the most daring and relevant contributions to contemporary Indian Fiction. The novel dives headlong into the complex and volatile landscape of twenty first century Indian politics, confronting not only the nation's ideological fractures but also the emotional and moral turbulence of the generation growing up amidst them. Set during the 2014 Indian general elections, a watershed moment that witnessed the consolidation of right-wing nationalism, the transformation of public discourse through digital media also the politicization of youth aspiration.*

*This article approaches Quarterlife through critical and argumentative framework situating the novel within the socio-political realities of post-liberalization India. Rege through her argument highlights more than just show what happened; it also questions and criticises the underlying ideologies of the time, interrogates and critiques the ideological undercurrents of the times. The novel exposes the moral compromises, performative, activism and digital*

Submitted: 07.01.2026

Revised: 11.02.2026

Accepted: 14.02.2026

Published: 15.02.2026

<sup>1</sup>Dr Sherly Winfred C. R, Assistant Professor of English, PG and Research Department of English, Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli - 620002, Tamil Nadu, India.

<sup>2</sup>P.Antony Maria Jenobhar, MA Literature, Dept. of English, St. Xavier's College (Autonomous), Palayamkottai - 627002, India.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declared no conflicts of interest.

Funding: No funding was received for this research.

Copyright: ©2026 Dr Sherly Winfred C. R & P. Antony Maria Jenobhar .

License: This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction, provided the original author and source are credited.

Citation: Winfred, Sherly C R, . "The Politik of a Generation: Modern Indian Political Milieu in Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* (2023). 21CILS: 21st Century Indian Literary Studies, vol. 1, no. 1, Feb. 2026, pp. 40-49.

*age contradictions that characterize urban Indian's political sensibility. This paper argues that Rege's fiction functions as a textual document of India's political adolescence. It captures a moment when politics seeps into every dimension of private life, revealing the fragility of conviction in an era of hyper- connectivity and ideological polarization.*

**Keywords :** millenials, Nationalism, Political Identity

## **Introduction**

Over the past two decades, Indian English fiction has increasingly turned its gaze toward the nation's contemporary political landscape and its pervasive influence on individual and collective existence. The literary focus has notably shifted from post- colonial anxieties and the grand narratives of nation- building to an interrogation of neo-liberal transformations, the resurgence of nationalism and the mediated realities of citizenship in the twenty-first century. The writers of the post - globalization era are less pre-occupied with questions of cultural recovery and more invested in the psychological and ethical impact of politics on private life. The changing literary ethos of India, reflects a nation in transition restless, polarized and deeply introspective. Within this evolving landscape, Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* (2023) emerges as a significant and timely intervention that captures the political coming-of-age of Indian millennials. The novel has its setting in the Urban scape of India, on the cusp of the 2014 general elections, *Quarterlife* marks it within a decisive historical moment, marked by the rise of right- wing nationalism, youth mobilization, and the spectacle of media politics. The period represents not merely an electoral turning point but an ideological watershed where political discourse was reframed through digital campaigns, populist imagery and aspirational rhetoric. Through the intertwined, narratives of Naren, Rohit and Amanda, Rege crafts a mosaic of youthful disquiet and ambition illustrating how macro-political shifts infiltrate micro-personal experiences. The urban, digital, aspirational serves as a microcosm of a transforming India, one negotiating between economic liberation and cultural nationalism.

Rege's characters embody the contradictions of a generation raised amidst globalization but confronted with deepening social fissures. Naren, a political journalist who cynicism reflects the broader fatigue of youth disillusioned by institutional corruption and performative nationalism. As he confesses "we are not reporting news anymore: we are curating outrage" (Rege 112). His words echo the commodification of truth in the media saturated public sphere, where political conviction is increasingly mediated by algorithms and spectacle. Adding relevance to that Rohit, a start-up professional, grapples with the ethical compromises demanded by neoliberal ambition, remarking that "everyone wants to change the world, but only if it fits their brand" ( Rege 154). These statements illustrate Rege's subtle critique of how political participation is often subsumed under consumerist self-fashioning, a central feature of the millennial condition. Meanwhile, Amanda,

the novel's more idealistic voice, personifies the moral dissonance of youth navigating between empathy and exhaustion. Her reflection "It's easy to be angry: what's hard is to stay human when everything around you turns into a campaign" (Rege 203) encapsulates the emotional and ethical fatigue of living within an age of continuous ideological performance. Through such voices, Rege positions *Quarterlife* not merely as a chronicle of political events but as a psychological cartography of India's urban generation, exposed, conflicted and constantly negotiating the line between authentic engagement and disillusioned withdrawal. "They remain slaves because they can't see what is beautiful in this world" (Rege 85). The author through her novel *Quarterlife* transcends the limits of realistic fiction to interrogate the very nature of modern political consciousness. The novel recollects, insists readers to question how individuals internalize ideology how politics becomes emotional rather than institutional more-than structural. In doing so, it reveals what the political theorist Arjun Appadurai calls "the anxiety of incompleteness, the tension between belonging and autonomy that defines citizenship in rapidly changing democracy" (47).

Rege's India is neither utopian nor dystopian, it is suspended in a state of ideological flux, where conviction itself is contingent. The novel dissects the political tone of India, also portrays the generational negotiation between idealism and disillusionment, between the promise of progress and seduction of populism. Through its blend of journalistic immediacy and literary introspection, Rege's novel becomes a narrative of moral awakening, compelling readers to confront the cost of apathy in a hyper-politicized world. As Amanda muses toward the novel's conclusion. "Politics isn't out there - it's in the choices we make every day, in how much we care or choose not to" (Rege 278). In that assertion lies the essence of Rege's *Quarterlife*, a call to awareness that is as urgent as it is unsettling.

### Literature Review

Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* is a recent addition to the landscape of Indian English fiction, it has already established itself as a significant "state of the nation" novel, one of that confronts the intricate web of politics, media and identity shaping twenty first century India. Critics have drawn parallels between *Quarterlife* and landmark works such as *The White Tiger* and *Sacred games*, both of which explore questions of power, moral decay and systemic inequality, the novel *Quarterlife* distinguishes itself in scope and sensibility. "In the old days there were one thousand castes and destinies in India. These days, there are just two kinds of men - the men with big bellies, and men with small bellies" (Adiga 75).

Adiga and Chandra focus on the structures of corruption and the machinery of power, Rege turns her attention inward to the inner lives of urban, educated millennials navigating ideological confusion, ethical dilemmas and the contradictions of privilege in an era of rapid political and economic change. Her narrative lens is deeply psychological, capturing how politics infiltrates emotional

life, shaping identity, aspiration and belonging. “It’s amazing. The moment you show cash, everyone knows you language” (Balram 45).

Scholars examining contemporary Indian literature have noted a marked transformation in its thematic priorities, particularly in the post liberalization era. The contemporary novel no longer confines itself to rural narratives or postcolonial recovery, rather, it reflects a media-saturated, globally connected and politically polarized India. Theories of neo liberal subjectivity and youth politics have become crucial to understanding how modern narratives express the intersections of ambition, ideology and self- fashioning. By shedding light upon it, the novel *Quarterlife* becomes a literary articulation of how neo liberalism shapes not only economic choices but also emotional and ethical one. It’s characters torn between authenticity and performance, illustrate the precarious balance between individual success and social conscience, reflecting the identity crisis of India’s youth under the dual pressures of capitalism and nationalism. “The moment you recognize what is beautiful in this world, you stop being a slave” (Balram 78).

What sets the novel apart is its ability to weave personal narratives with the political consciousness. Rege’s millennials are not detached observers of change, they are participants, sometimes unwillingly, often conflicted in a national drama that tests their values and integrity. The novel exposes how media spectacle and political polarization blur the boundaries between truth and performance, leaving young citizens to navigate an increasingly unstable moral landscape. While most of the critical discussion of the novel have centralized on its political realism, stylistic form or representation of urban life, this paper seeks to extend the conversation. It situates *Quarterlife* within contemporary socio-political contexts, linking its fictional insights to empirical realities, youth voting patterns, digital activism and the growing entanglement of media and ideology. By adding these connections, the study treats *Quarterlife* as more than literary fiction; it becomes a cultural document that records the emotional and ethical consciousness of a generation living through India’s democratic transformation. Through this synthesis of literature and lived politics, the novel reveals the human cost of ideological polarization, making it a crucial text for understanding both the politics and psychology of twenty first century India.

### **Objectives and Aim**

This study views Devika Rege’s *Quarterlife* as a revealing mirror of contemporary Indian political culture, especially as it is felt and interpreted by the millennial generation. Rege’s novel provides a textured understanding of what it means to come of age in a time when politics is no longer confined to institutions but seeps into conversations, workplaces, relationships and moral choices. The aim of this research is to examine how *Quarterlife* reflects and questions the political and ideological shifts that have shaped India since 2014, the consolidation of right-wing nationalism, the spread of digital populism, and the reconfiguration of youth identity in an era defined by neoliberal ambition. Through its portrayal of Naren,

Rohit, Amanda and their intersecting worlds, the novel captures the emotional and ethical dilemmas of a generation trying to find authenticity amidst the noise of media and the pressures of self- making. The paper also seeks to connect Rege's fictional world with real socio-political data, including statistics on youth engagement, voter participation and digital activism, to reveal how literature and lived experience illuminate one another. In doing so, the study underscores the novel's implicit critique of performance politics, exploring how surface- level activism, media spectacle and market, driven aspirations often dilute genuine civic engagement. More than a story about young urban Indians it remains as a cultural document of India's evolving democracy, exposing how personal conviction, collective identity, and political participation are continuously negotiated turbulence.

### **Methodology**

This research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, combining close reading with analysis of the social and political context. The article concentrates on Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* examining how the novel constructs its characters, shapes its narratives and addresses major themes such as politics, identity and ambition. To support its literary analysis, corporate data from election reports and youth political participation surveys, sources like the Election commission of India, business standard and Mint. Statistics on youth voter turnout helped to anchor the novel's political landscape in actual events, emphasizing how millennials have become increasingly significant at the polls, especially during the 2014 general elections. By integrating detailed literary analysis with quantitative data, this article employs a mixed method approach that considers the novel not only as fiction but also as a political text grounded in real, measurable shifts in India's democracy.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* throws its characters into the very heart of the tension between personal ambition and political ideology, a conflict that defines much of contemporary Indian society. The novel does not romanticize political engagement, instead it exposes its moral ambiguities and emotional costs. For Naren, politics is not a moral pursuit but a pragmatic career path a way to transform visibility into power. His decision to join the nationalist Bharat Party is not born from ideological conviction but from calculated self interest. As he remarks, Idealism doesn't pay the bills; alignment does (Rege 118). In his world view, the language of nationalism becomes a tool for social mobility, merging neoliberal ambition with the rhetoric of collective purpose. Rege, through Naren's ascent, critiques the growing instrumentalization of politics, where civic participation is increasingly reframed as an opportunity for personal branding. Naren's journey reflects a troubling contemporary truth; politics; for many, is no longer an ethical vocation but a stage for career advancement and self promotion.

In sharp contrast, Rohit embodies the opposite impulse the impulse, the paralysis of the morally conscious observer. As an artist, he feels injustice deeply but remains hesitant to translate empathy into political commitment. His reflections “Everyone wants a change, but no one wants to choose a side” (Rege162) encapsulate the pervasive disillusionment of India’s urban youth. Rohit’s restlessness is emblematic of a generation caught between awareness and action, idealism and fatigue. His internal struggle reveals how the contemporary millennial subject is shaped by moral sensitivity but political detachment, a tendency to care passionately about causes while avoiding alignment with organized power. Rege uses Rohit’s hesitancy not as weakness but as a mirror to our times, portraying a generation that recognizes systemic flaws yet mistrusts both state and ideology.

Then there is Amanda, the American journalist of Indian origin, who arrives in India with the confidence of the liberal ideas and the distance of diaspora privilege. Initially she views Indian politics through the lens of western progressivism, assuming moral clarity, her encounters with the local realities unravel the certainty. As she confesses later in the random lines “It’s easier to be right from afar; here, every truth comes with a cost” (Rege 219), through the character Amanda, Rege critiques the outsider’s gaze - the tendency to moralize without context and highlights how proximity complicates principle. Amanda’s gradual disillusionment underscores the fragility of moral binaries in a politically volatile landscape, exposing the limits of empathy without experience.

Rege’s brilliance lies in how she weaves emotional and political narratives together. Her character does not engage with politics as an abstract institution; rather, politics invades their friendships, aspirations and inner lives. It becomes deeply personal, unpredictable and ethically unstable. Through this, *Quarterlife* dismantles the separation between political ideology and emotional experience, illustrating how identity itself becomes politicized. Equally compelling is Rege’s critique of the media-saturated ecosystem that frames these characters’ realities. In *Quarterlife*, political truth is rarely direct, it is filtered, edited, and packaged through journalism, tweets, and curated narratives. The novel portrays a world where spectacle supersedes substance, and where misinformation, partisanship, and emotional manipulation define what people believe to be true. The character remarks, “Facts don’t matter when the story feels right” (Rege 174), Rege captures the epistemic collapse of the digital age where the media no longer simply reports reality but manufactures it.

Through the interplay of ambition, emotion, and media, *Quarterlife* becomes a compelling portrait of India’s post-2014 political milieu. It invites readers to question the nature of civic engagement in a world where ideology is transactional, empathy is mediated, and truth is always contested. Rege’s narrative thus performs a dual function: it documents the emotional climate of a polarized generation and critiques the structures that sustain its confusion the market, the media, and the myth of meritocracy. In doing so, she crafts not merely a political novel but a

human study of complicity, conviction, and the fragile pursuit of meaning in an age where politics has become both personal and performative.

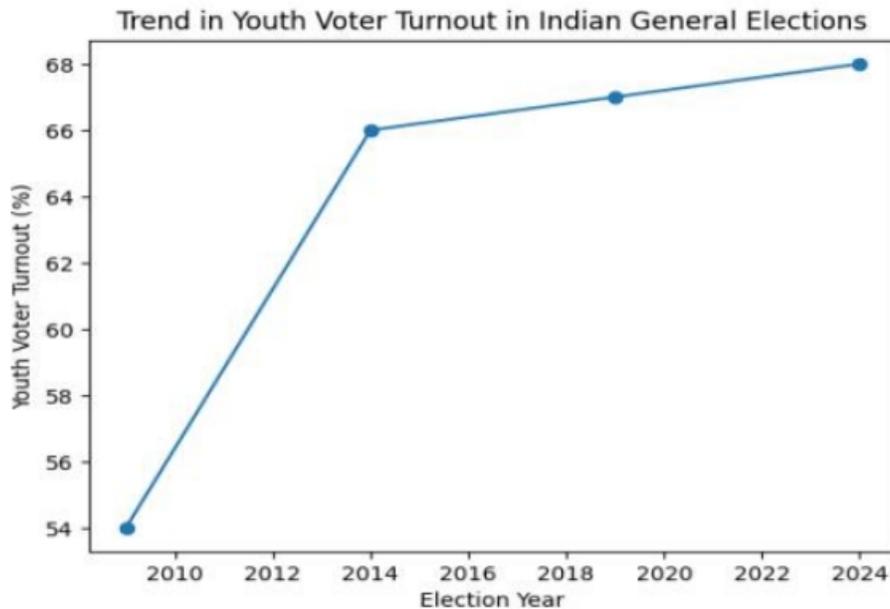


Figure 1: Trend in Youth Voter Turnout in Indian General Elections (2009–2024). Source: Compiled from Election Commission of India reports, as cited in Business Standard.

The analysis of *Quarterlife*, examined alongside contemporary political data, reveals several compelling insights into the shifting patterns of youth participation and political consciousness in post-2014 India. The statistical trends alone illustrate a remarkable transformation: youth voter turnout has risen steadily from approximately 54% in 2009 to nearly 68% by the 2019 - 2024 elections, as indicated by data compiled from the Election Commission of India. This growth points toward a generation that is not politically indifferent but increasingly visible in democratic processes, asserting its agency within the national narrative. The novel *Quarterlife* complicates this picture. While the quantitative data suggest heightened engagement, Rege's narrative exposes the emotional and ideological contradictions underlying that participation. Her millennial characters ambitious, informed, and politically aware are also marked by distrust toward formal institutions and a deep ambivalence about ideology itself. Their engagement is personal, performative, and often mediated through digital platforms, echoing findings from Mint surveys that report a strong sense of national pride among Indian youth but relatively low rates of party membership. Rege's fiction thus reflects an emerging reality: for many young Indians, politics has become a space of expression rather than affiliation a realm where visibility, branding, and online discourse often replace traditional forms of activism or loyalty.

This tension between participation and skepticism reflects a broader neoliberal redefinition of citizenship, where identity and belief are shaped less by

ideology and more by media exposure and self-performance. *Quarterlife* portrays this dynamic vividly: Naren's calculated use of nationalism as a career strategy, Rohit's hesitant detachment, and Amanda's disillusioned empathy all illustrate the fragmentation of political conviction in an era of constant visibility. As the *Business Standard* notes in its commentary on youth political behaviour, success in Indian democracy increasingly depends on mastering narrative and digital engagement, rather than on ideological depth or policy expertise. Rege's narrative resonates powerfully with this trend, revealing how the political stage has merged with the social media stage, transforming citizenship into a spectacle of curated beliefs and consumable identities. In this sense, the findings affirm that *Quarterlife* does more than depict millennial life it diagnoses the new emotional economy of Indian democracy, where belief competes with branding, and where political commitment is constantly negotiated in the gaze of an audience. The data and the novel, taken together, uncover not only the rising participation of youth in democratic processes but also the fragility and performative nature of that engagement in an age defined by visibility and uncertainty.

### **Discussion of Findings**

Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* distinguishes itself as a realist political novel rooted in the lived experiences of Indian millennials navigating a time of ideological flux and emotional uncertainty. The novel's thematic preoccupations align closely with empirical data on youth participation in Indian democracy, such as the marked rise in voter turnout after 2014 (see Fig. 1). This correspondence reinforces Rege's depiction of a generation that is politically conscious yet morally conflicted, eager to participate but unsure of the authenticity or impact of that participation. *Quarterlife* transforms these statistics into story giving voice, emotion, and human texture to the abstract figures that describe civic engagement.

Rege's portrayal of politics as performance rather than conviction echoes what contemporary critics identify as the defining feature of media-driven democracies. In an environment where visibility equates to influence, political engagement becomes a form of spectacle, sustained by rhetoric, branding, and digital optics. Naren's strategic involvement in the Bharat Party epitomizes this shift: his participation is less about collective good and more about personal advancement. Rege uses his character to critique how neoliberal ambition and right-wing populism intersect, creating a new kind of political actor pragmatic, self-aware, and performative. This resonates with the broader national climate, where, as *Business Standard* and *Mint* surveys suggest, young Indians express strong patriotic sentiment but limited ideological loyalty. At the same time, *Quarterlife* exposes the psychological burden of political engagement in such an environment. Characters like Rohit and Amanda reveal the personal dissonance of individuals who care deeply about justice yet feel alienated by the systems that claim to uphold it. Rohit's moral paralysis the fear of taking sides reflects the generational unease of those caught between awareness and exhaustion, while Amanda's

gradual disillusionment demonstrates how empathy collides with complexity when ideals meet lived reality. Their experiences echo the emotional contradictions of millennial political identity: a combination of activism and apathy, conviction and cynicism.

One of the novel's most striking insights, as underscored by this study, is how political ideologies permeate intimate relationships. Rege entwines the political with the personal so seamlessly that friendship, love, and ambition all become arenas of ideological negotiation. In doing so, she foregrounds how political discourse no longer exists at the margins of private life but infiltrates everyday interactions echoing the sociological reality of an India where social media, news cycles, and identity politics shape both public perception and private emotion. It also expresses the state of Indian democracy, interrogates, emotional and ethical dimensions. It invites readers to confront the moral cost of participation, asking what it means to remain engaged without surrendering integrity in a system that rewards performance over principle. The convergence of literary narrative and empirical data in this analysis underscores the novel's depth: it functions simultaneously as a mirror of national change and a meditation on individual conscience. In the world Rege constructs, caring about politics is not simply a civic duty it is a psychological struggle, an act of endurance that defines what it means to be young, aware, and human in twenty-first-century India.

Devika Rege's *Quarterlife* stands as one of the most perceptive and courageous works in contemporary Indian English fiction, offering a profound reflection on what it means to come of age in an era defined by political restlessness, media noise, and moral ambiguity. More than a novel of its time, *Quarterlife* captures the pulse of a generation caught between hope and fatigue, between the ideal of civic responsibility and the reality of disillusionment. Rege's narrative situates her characters Naren, Rohit, and Amanda within a society where politics permeates everyday life, shaping personal ambitions, social relations, and ethical choices. Their struggles embody the larger anxieties of India's millennials: the constant tension between the desire to act and the fear of futility, between the dream of change and the lure of comfort.

Through its sharp political consciousness and emotional realism, *Quarterlife* dismantles the boundaries between the public and the private. The novel becomes a psychological portrait of India's democracy itself vibrant yet conflicted, aspirational yet wounded. Rege's attention to media narratives, performative activism, and neoliberal values exposes how the political realm has become increasingly aestheticized and commodified, turning participation into spectacle, beneath this surface, she reveals something more enduring the human need to believe in something larger than oneself. The novel's characters, despite their contradictions, are propelled by a restless search for meaning amid ideological turbulence, mirroring the moral and emotional labour of citizenship in modern India.

This article's analysis, informed by both textual interpretation and empirical political data on youth participation, reinforces that *Quarterlife* operates not only as a creative work but also as a document of social reality. It archives, almost like a generational diary, the psychological and political transformations of post-2014 India an India negotiating its identity in the shadow of nationalism and the promises of neoliberal progress. The novel's brilliance lies in how it humanizes these transformations, translating abstract political debates into lived experience and ethical conflict. *Quarterlife* compels readers to pause and question the true cost of political ambition, and the ways in which ideals are compromised, reshaped, or abandoned in pursuit of success and belonging. It urges a reckoning with the fragility of conviction in a society that rewards conformity and spectacle over sincerity and depth. By confronting these contradictions, Rege does not simply narrate a generation's confusion she gives voice to its conscience. Her novel emerges as both a mirror and a critique, illuminating the inner life of democracy through the lens of youth disquiet. In its honesty, empathy, and moral intensity, *Quarterlife* reminds us that literature remains one of the few spaces where the emotional truth of politics can still be told with clarity, compassion, and courage.

### Works Cited

- Adiga, Aravind. *The White Tiger*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2008.
- Appadurai, Arjun. *Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger*. Duke University Press, 2006.
- Chandra, Vikram. *Sacred Games*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2006.
- "Election Commission of India Reports." *Election Commission of India, 2009-2024*, <https://eci.gov.in>.
- "India's Young Voters and Political Participation: Trends Since 2014." *Business Standard*, 2024, <https://www.business-standard.com>.
- "Millennials and Politics in Post-2014 India." *Mint*, 2024, <https://www.livemint.com>.
- Rege, Devika. *Quarterlife*. HarperCollins Publishers India, 2023.