

THE ISSUE OF POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS AND INDIVIDUAL FREEDOM IN THE NOVELS OF MARIO VARGAS LLOSA

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Abstract. This article explores the interrelation between political consciousness and individual freedom in the novels of Mario Vargas Llosa. As one of the central figures of the Latin American literary "Boom," Vargas Llosa consistently examines the tension between oppressive political systems and the individual's struggle for autonomy. Through close textual analysis of selected novels-particularly *The Time of the Hero*, *Conversation in the Cathedral*, and *The Feast of the Goat*-this study demonstrates how the author constructs complex narrative structures to reveal the mechanisms of authoritarian power and the psychological consequences of political repression. The article argues that Vargas Llosa's fiction not only critiques dictatorship and corruption but also proposes a liberal-humanist vision in which individual freedom is inseparable from civic responsibility and moral awareness. By integrating narratological and socio-political approaches, the study highlights the writer's contribution to political modernism and contemporary debates on democracy and personal agency.

Keywords: political consciousness, individual freedom, dictatorship, liberalism, Latin American literature, narrative technique, authoritarianism.

INTRODUCTION. The relationship between literature and politics has long been central to Latin American narrative tradition. In the works of Mario Vargas Llosa, this relationship acquires particular intensity. His novels consistently investigate how political systems shape human behavior, moral choices, and psychological identity. Rather than presenting politics as a distant background, Vargas Llosa situates it at the core of everyday life, revealing how structures of

power penetrate private existence.

Political consciousness in Vargas Llosa's fiction is not limited to explicit ideological statements. It emerges through characters' gradual awareness of injustice, corruption, and manipulation. Individual freedom, meanwhile, is portrayed as both a personal aspiration and a fragile social condition, constantly threatened by authoritarian regimes. The dialectical tension between these two forces forms the backbone of many of his most influential works.

METHODS. Mario Vargas Llosa belongs to the generation associated with the Latin American "Boom," alongside writers such as Gabriel García Márquez and Julio Cortázar. This literary movement of the 1960s and 1970s was characterized not only by stylistic innovation but also by an internationalization of Latin American fiction. Authors of the Boom achieved global readership, and their works were widely translated, contributing to a redefinition of the Latin American novel as formally daring and politically engaged. Experimental narrative techniques—nonlinear structures, interior monologue, polyphony, and metafiction—were combined with a deep exploration of historical trauma and collective memory.

Peru, Vargas Llosa's homeland, experienced political instability, military rule, and institutional corruption throughout the twentieth century. These historical circumstances deeply influenced his worldview and literary imagination. His early experiences at the Leoncio Prado Military Academy, which later inspired *The Time of the Hero*, exposed him to the rigid hierarchies and violence embedded in authoritarian systems. Over time, Vargas Llosa's political thought evolved significantly: initially sympathetic to leftist revolutionary ideals, he later became a vocal critic of authoritarianism in all forms, whether from the right or the left. This ideological transformation further enriched his exploration of political consciousness in fiction.

Unlike purely magical-realist narratives, Vargas Llosa's fiction often adopts a critical realist stance, dissecting institutions such as the military, the Church, the press, and the state apparatus. His narrative experiments—fragmented chronology,

multiple perspectives, shifting narrators, and abrupt temporal transitions-mirror the complexity of political truth and the fragmentation of individual identity under repression. Rather than presenting a single authoritative viewpoint, his novels compel readers to reconstruct events from conflicting testimonies, thereby participating actively in the search for truth. This structural strategy reflects his belief that political reality itself is unstable and mediated by power.

In *The Time of the Hero* (1963), Vargas Llosa examines the authoritarian microcosm of a military academy. The institution functions as a symbolic representation of the state, where violence, surveillance, and hierarchy are normalized. Students are trained not only in military discipline but also in the logic of obedience, silence, and complicity. Political consciousness emerges gradually through the characters' lived experiences of humiliation and injustice. The novel reveals how authoritarian systems perpetuate themselves by encouraging individuals to internalize fear and reproduce oppressive norms. The cadets' moral dilemmas-whether to remain silent or expose wrongdoing-echo broader societal tensions in Peru and other Latin American nations under dictatorship.

Importantly, the novel also highlights the psychological dimension of repression. Characters struggle with fractured identities, torn between personal ethics and institutional loyalty. Masculinity itself becomes politicized, constructed through aggression and dominance. In this way, Vargas Llosa suggests that authoritarianism reshapes not only political structures but also personal relationships and self-perception.

Here, individual freedom appears constrained by institutional structures. Yet the very act of narrating resistance-of exposing corruption and giving voice to silenced experiences-constitutes a literary gesture of freedom. Vargas Llosa transforms storytelling into a form of political critique. By unveiling hidden mechanisms of power, he affirms literature's capacity to challenge official narratives and awaken political awareness. Thus, his work demonstrates that fiction can serve both as an aesthetic experiment and as an ethical intervention in the public sphere,

bridging the gap between artistic innovation and civic responsibility.

DISCUSSION . In *Conversation in the Cathedral* (1969), Mario Vargas Llosa deepens his exploration of political consciousness by presenting dictatorship not simply as a political condition but as a pervasive psychological environment. The novel famously poses the question: “At what precise moment had Peru fucked itself up?” This provocative inquiry encapsulates collective disillusionment under authoritarian rule and frames the narrative as an investigation into national moral collapse.

Set during the regime of Manuel Odría, the novel reconstructs a society marked by censorship, surveillance, and corruption. Rather than offering a straightforward chronological account, Vargas Llosa structures the narrative around an extended conversation between Santiago Zavala and Ambrosio in a bar ironically named “La Catedral.” Through layered flashbacks and intersecting memories, private lives become inseparable from public decay. Political repression appears not only as imprisonment or torture but also as moral compromise, opportunism, and silence. The dictatorship infiltrates journalism, business, and family life, revealing how authoritarianism thrives through networks of complicity.

Individual freedom in this text becomes an existential dilemma. The characters possess awareness of corruption, yet they feel immobilized by fear, resignation, or self-interest. Santiago’s cynicism exemplifies the paralysis of an intellectual who recognizes injustice but lacks faith in collective action. Vargas Llosa suggests that political consciousness without agency produces despair. Freedom, therefore, requires more than critical understanding-it demands moral courage and engagement. The collapse of illusions in the novel reflects the loss of faith in ideological absolutes, whether revolutionary or conservative.

In *The Feast of the Goat* (2000), Vargas Llosa turns to the dictatorship of Rafael Trujillo in the Dominican Republic. This historical novel intertwines three narrative strands: Trujillo’s final day in power, the conspirators who plan his assassination, and the return of Urania Cabral decades later. By juxtaposing personal

trauma with national history, Vargas Llosa demonstrates how tyranny extends beyond political institutions into intimate spheres of life. Absolute power corrupts not only governance but also language, sexuality, and memory.

Unlike earlier works focused primarily on systemic critique, this novel foregrounds personal responsibility. Characters confront their complicity in sustaining oppression-whether through ambition, fear, or loyalty. Political consciousness becomes a painful recognition of moral failure and delayed resistance. Urania's testimony underscores the gendered dimensions of dictatorship, revealing how patriarchal authority and political domination intersect. In this sense, freedom is inseparable from memory and truth. Revisiting traumatic history becomes a necessary act of ethical reconstruction.

Across these works, Vargas Llosa's formal experimentation serves a philosophical purpose. Fragmented timelines, multiple narrators, interior monologues, and abrupt transitions mirror the instability of truth under authoritarian regimes. Readers must actively reconstruct events from dispersed fragments, mirroring the citizen's task of piecing together suppressed realities. Narrative complexity resists the simplifications typical of propaganda and ideological dogma.

Thus, narrative structure itself becomes an embodiment of political consciousness. By rejecting linear transparency, Vargas Llosa symbolically resists authoritarian reductionism. His fiction insists that truth is plural, contested, and difficult to attain. This epistemological stance aligns with his broader defense of liberal democratic values, including freedom of expression, institutional accountability, and pluralism.

Throughout his intellectual career-including his later participation in public political debates-Vargas Llosa has articulated a vision of freedom grounded in individual dignity and rational discourse. His novels caution against both totalitarian oppression and passive indifference. Importantly, he does not idealize freedom as limitless autonomy; rather, he portrays it as a fragile and continuous achievement requiring vigilance, ethical responsibility, and civic participation.

Ultimately, the collapse of illusions in *Conversation in the Cathedral* and the moral reckoning in *The Feast of the Goat* demonstrate Vargas Llosa's enduring conviction: literature can illuminate the mechanisms of power, awaken political awareness, and preserve the memory necessary for genuine freedom.

CONCLUSIONS. The novels of Mario Vargas Llosa offer a profound exploration of political consciousness and individual freedom. By portraying authoritarian systems from within, he reveals how power infiltrates daily life, language, sexuality, education, journalism, and family structures, ultimately shaping moral identity. His fiction demonstrates that dictatorship is sustained not only by force but also by habits of obedience, social hierarchies, and internalized fear. In this sense, political oppression becomes a cultural and psychological phenomenon as much as a governmental one.

At the same time, his works affirm literature's capacity to resist silence and stimulate critical awareness. Through complex narrative architecture-polyphonic voices, disrupted chronology, and shifting perspectives-Vargas Llosa compels readers to question official versions of truth. The act of reading becomes an ethical exercise: the reader must evaluate conflicting testimonies, detect manipulation, and reconstruct hidden realities. In doing so, literature mirrors democratic practice, which depends on informed judgment and active participation rather than passive acceptance.

Political consciousness, in Vargas Llosa's vision, emerges through recognition of injustice and the courage to confront it. Yet he also acknowledges its ambiguities. Awareness alone does not guarantee transformation; without moral resolve and collective engagement, it may lead to cynicism or resignation. His characters often struggle between complicity and resistance, illustrating how fragile ethical integrity can be under pressure. This tension reflects broader historical experiences in Latin America, where intellectuals and citizens alike faced difficult choices amid repression and ideological polarization.

Individual freedom, though vulnerable, remains possible through ethical responsibility, memory, and narrative truth. Vargas Llosa frequently underscores the importance of remembering traumatic histories, arguing implicitly that societies unable to confront their past risk repeating cycles of violence. Memory becomes an instrument of dignity, restoring voices silenced by fear. In this regard, storytelling functions as both testimony and moral reckoning.

Moreover, Vargas Llosa situates freedom within institutional frameworks. His broader intellectual essays and public interventions emphasize the necessity of the rule of law, pluralism, freedom of expression, and democratic accountability. Thus, his literary imagination aligns with a philosophical commitment to liberal democratic values, not as abstract ideals but as lived practices requiring vigilance and civic responsibility.

His contribution to world literature lies not only in stylistic innovation but also in his sustained inquiry into the moral foundations of democracy. By uniting aesthetic experimentation with ethical seriousness, Vargas Llosa demonstrates that the novel can serve as a space where political history, personal identity, and philosophical reflection intersect. His works ultimately suggest that freedom is neither guaranteed nor absolute; it is a continuous project shaped by memory, critical thought, and the willingness to defend human dignity against the pressures of power.

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