

Shashi Tharoor's Riot: Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture

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Abstract

History, politics and culture have always been a dominant preoccupation of the Indian-English novelists. This compulsive obsession was perhaps inevitable since the genre originated and developed from concurrently with the climactic phase of colonial rules, the stirrings of nationalist sentiment and its full flowering in the final stages of the freedom movement. In this paper an attempt is made to examine Shashi Tharoor's Riot as a multilayered narrative that sheds light on many contemporary issues on history, politics and culture of India.

“If there was ever a time when writers could refuge from politics in the world of imagination, then that time has long past”, says Bill Ashcroft, “The world is richer and yet more people are poorer than any time in history. Neither writing nor criticism can avoid the call to justice forced on the world by the mushrooming of neo-liberal political and economic power.”¹ Yet few writers have accepted that challenge as resolutely as Khushwant Singh, V. S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Chaman Nahal, Nayanatra Sahgal, Arundhati Roy and Shashi Tharoor. In this paper an attempt is made to examine the perspectives on history, politics and culture in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. “*Riot* skims the anguish of isolation and the social mores of Indian society bringing back once in a while the historic crutches of suspicion and divisiveness that we have been left with”², opines Uma Nair. A reading of *Riot* makes it clear that Tharoor seems to be living his life on

two levels. On one level, he appears to be the quintessential international civil-servant keeping the peace and dousing the flames in the world's flashpoints and on the other, he seems to search the way-out of pacifying communalism and violence plaguing Indian awareness to a great extent. In one of his interviews Tharoor says: "I have been extraordinary, emotionally and intellectually fascinated by the idea of India, by the forces that have shaped and made India and by the forces that have sometimes threatened to unmake it."³

While writing novel as history, Shashi Tharoor is no different from a journalist. He uses journalistic reporting, diary writing, and interviews to depict reality from a multiple point of view that concerns of his novel. He is an author who writes 'with malice towards one and all.' He holds nothing sacred and enjoys the task of lambasting the establishment- the accepted order of things, whether social, political, cultural, religious or historical, casting aspersions even on the exalted. One reviewer of the novel observes: "*Riot* is a novel about the ownership of history, about love, hate, cultural collision religious, fanaticism and impossibility of knowing the truth."⁴ Tharoor himself says:

"The themes that concern me in this novel: love and of hate; cultural collision, in particular, in this case the Hindu/Muslim collision, the American/Indian collision, and within India the collision between the English-educated elites of India and people in the rural heartland; and as well, issues of the unknowability of history, the way in which identities are constructed through an imagining of history; and finally, perhaps, the unknowability of the truth."⁵

Nonetheless, taking history as its base, Tharoor revisits the past with objectivity and irony, and transforms it into historiographical meta-fiction which problematizes history by presenting historical incidents and characters. *Riot* is based on the actual incident related to a riot that took place in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. The fictional account of the riot, the actual incidents relating to the coca-cola controversy in India and the conflicts of Ram Janam Bhoomi/Babri Masjid indicate the understanding that treats history as fiction. *Riot* marks the emergence of a new perspective vis-à-vis fictional in its clear diversion from being a reflection of social reality. Instead of giving expression to some already existing reality or

worldview the novel develops into a kind of discursive formation of ideas and an expression of divergent views forming specific relations to historical events. Hence the historical events as well as the fictional happenings depicted in the novel offers multiplicity of perspectives and provide different versions of historical as well as the fictional truth.

The plot of the novel starts with the death of an American social worker Priscilla Hart, during the sectarian violence in the wake of Babri Masjid agitation. “No other foreigner has died in the sectarian violence that has killed several hundred Indians in the last three weeks, and Ms. Hart may simply have been in the wrong place at the wrong time”⁶, an embassy spokesman suggested. Her estranged parents come to visit Zailgarh—the place of Priscilla’s death and the story unfolds the investigation of an American journalist, Randy Diggs who is looking for a “story” for the western media and accompanies Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart, the parents of Priscilla Hart from United States of America. There he meets the local chauvinistic Hindu fundamental leader Ram Charan Gupta to investigate the politics behind riot. Mr. Gupta supports the cause of construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. He says, “In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore. It is the Ram Janam Bhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Rama. A fit site for a grand temple....” (52). In olden days a great temple stood there. There are legends about that pilgrims from all over India would come to worship Ram there. But a Muslim king, the Mughal emperor Babur, a foreigner from central Asia, knocked it down and in its place he built a big mosque, which was named after him, the Babri Masjid. “A mosque on Hindu’s holiest site! Muslims praying to Mecca on the very spot where our divine Lord Ram was born” (52). Naturally Hindu community was much hurt by this. Mr. Gupta strongly asks: “Would Muslims be happy if some Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca” (53). To him, Muslims are evil people. “They are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they are all descended from conquerors from Arabia or Persia or Samarkand”(56). He tells Mr. Diggs: “Muslims are fanatics and

terrorists; they only understand the language of force.... Wherever these Muslims are, they fight with others. Violence against non-Muslims is in their blood" (57).

For hundreds of years Indians suffered under the Muslim yoke. Then the British came, and things were no better. They thought then that after independence, everything would change. Most of the Muslims in Ayodhya left for Pakistan. The mosque was no longer much needed as a mosque. Then, a miracle occurred. Some devotees found that an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of the mosque. It was clear sign from God. His temple had to be rebuilt on that sacred spot. Hindus went to courts. But they said that neither Hindus nor Muslims could worship there. According to Mr. Gupta: "They are all atheists and communists in power in our country, people who have lost their roots" (53).

On the other hand, Mohammad Sarwar, a Muslim scholar, teaching in Department of History, Delhi University tries to defend the minority psyche of Muslims. He raises his voice against the "composite culture" or "composite religiosity" (64) of North India. He says that a number of Muslims religious figures are worshipped in India by Hindus like Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti, Shah Madar, Ghazi Miyan, Shaikh Nasiruddin who was known as Chiragh-I-Delhi, or Khwaja Khizr, the patron saint of boatmen etc. but still Hindus have grudges against Muslims. He says: "Indian Muslims suffer disadvantages, even discrimination, in a hundred ways...." (112). There are prejudices in this country. India does not believe in secularism. Her citizens are radicals. The Hindutva brigade is trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs, degrading evidence of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory. They want to teach Muslims a lesson, though they have not learned many lessons themselves. He often thinks of Mohammad Iqbal, the great Urdu poet who wrote: "Tumhari tahzeeb khud apne khanjar se khudkhushi karegi/Jo shukh-I-nazuk pe aashiyān banega,napaidar hoga-- Our civilization that will commit suicide out of its own complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction" (67). He points out that Muslims are part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. Without them this splendid structure of India is incomplete. They are the essential element, which has gone into building India.

He robustly says: “Muslim didn’t partition the country- the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did” (111). In fact, most of the country’s Islamic leaders like Maulana Maudoodi were bitterly opposed to the movement for Pakistan. They felt that Islam should prevail over the world as a whole, and thought it treasonous—both to India and to Islam itself. “Pakistan was created by “bad” Muslims, secular Muslims, not by the “good” Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to speak.”(109) Muslims gave India what she needed most, “the most precious of gifts from Islam’s treasury, the message of human equality”(108). In this way he highlights the plight of Muslims community and says that “Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism” (108).

Gurinder Singh, a Sikh Cop whose sole mission is to control the riots no matter what the cost would be and most importantly Lakshman, an Oscar Wilde quoting district administrator believes in the futility of Ram Mandir cause. He captures the essence of the whole show and tries to maintain harmony knowing that he is fighting a lost battle. “But who owns India’s history? Are there my history and his, and his history about my history? This is, in many ways, what this whole Ram Janamabhoomi agitation is about- about the reclaiming of history by those who feel that they were, at one point, written out of the script. But can they write a new history without doing violence to the inheritors of the old?”(110) At another point, he says that “They (Hindus) want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge” (147). His views remind us of the last lines of Matthew Arnold’s *Dover Beach*:

“The world, which seems,
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.”⁷

The beauty of the novel lies in the way the author points a very balanced picture of the views of the different communities, what really emerges is the conflict of communities rather than the conflict of religions. It is about the majority community, the Hindus trying to establish and reinforce their identity and the minority community, the Muslims, maintaining theirs. Each and every issue is politicized and it is the innocent victims like Priscilla who suffer.

Highlighting the conflicts in politics, Tharoor talks about the politicians of India who were responsible for Hindu- Muslim partition, the status quo existed at that time and how it was handled at their advantage. The politicians exploit the mob psychology in the name of religion. As far as the shifting paradigms of power politics are concerned, the politics, instead of art of governing, has become the master art of mis-governance. The rule of law has been replaced by misrule by law and rule of lawlessness by rules and regulations. The state agencies meant to administer are being misused to mal-administer. The police excesses and bureaucratic immoderation have become the order of the day. The citizens' apathy has gone down to such abysmal depths that citizens take the pathetic state of affairs as a way of life.

The power hungry hawkish politicians with their hellish and fiendish power politics stratagems are flirting and prostituting with religion for their personal and political gains. The self-style religious conmen are also pampering these political hucksters and tricksters without giving second thought to the irreparable damages being caused to the state, society and humanity. This unholy nexus is considerably responsible for the problem of communalism is sowing the seeds of hatred and hostility in the name of religion. It has not only derailed all the processes of nation building, but also put the unity and integrity of the nation in jeopardy, denigrating the national prestige, trampling down the centuries old interaction, exchange, cooperation, accommodation and adjustment. Moreover, the religious institutions have lost their sanctity. The Mandirs and Masjids have become pathways to parliament and assemblies. The unconscionable use of religion as a tool of exploitation has made India virtually a wounded civilization. It has dismantled the resilience and strength of Indian unity and integrity and created innumerable ugly divisions, cleavages and fissures in place of rich and

variegated diversities and pluralities. But, we, instead of learning lessons from the past repeat them with more vehemence. Hence, chaos, disorder, violence and riots have taken permanent place in our society. This sordid and squalid state of affairs has made India to appear godforsaken land. To rebuild and establish 'Ram Rajya' is impossible. There is no sign of any progress. But the thousands of people have become the victim of the soil of Ayodhya. Lakshman's poem *How to Sleep at Night – Advice to the World's Politicians* bitterly attacks the contemporary politicians. He writes:

“Try to think of nothing.
That's the secret.
Try to think of nothing.

Do not think of work not done,
of promises unkept, calls to return,
or the agendas you have failed to prepare for meetings yet unheld.

.....
.....

No, do not think
of the solitary tear, the broken limb,
The rubble-strewn home, the choking scream;
never think
of piled –up bodies, blazing flames
shattered lives, or sundered souls.
Do not think of the triumph of the torture
the wails of the hungry,
the screams of the mutilated,
or the indifferent smirk
of the sleek.

Think of nothing.
Then you will be able
to sleep.” (92)

One factor that really keeps us glued to the book is the presentation of Priscilla-Lakshman relationship. It highlights contrasting features of two cultures—Western and Eastern, Occident and Orient. They represent the attitudes of two different cultures towards love, sex, and marriage in concrete terms. When Lakshman asks Priscilla: “These guys (her past lovers) you went out with, did you sleep with them” (83), evokes a casual response from her. “Some of them” (83) replied Priscilla without any sense of guilt and shame. Further she says, “Lucky, I’m twenty four.... You didn’t expect me to be a virgin, did you? (83). But in India it is considered to be a sin, if a girl establishes any relation with a man before her marriage. He tells Priscilla “...Zalilgarh is not America. Not America. In America you are doing such and such and so and so, but here it is different” (13). Gita, Lakshman’s wife presents the virginity and virtuosity of an Indian woman. Lakshman tells Priscilla: “Of course she was a virgin. Forget sex, she hadn’t kissed a boy, she hadn’t even held hands with one. That’s how it is in India. That’s what’s expected (83)”. Similarly he explains the nature, significance, and sanctity of marriage in Indian context: “In India we know that marriage leads to love, which is why divorce is almost unknown here, and love lives on even when marital partner dies, because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society as well as our psyche.” (103)

In America marriage is a bond between two lovers but in India, marriage is an arrangement between families, one of the means for perpetuating the social order. There are other details about Indian ways of life that give a multidimensional picture of India as something exotic to the foreign readers and observers. Priscilla Hart wrote to her friend Cindy Vateriani about some aspects of Indian social life that she considers striking and strange. These aspects of Indian social life make her consider India “so complex a land.” She feels that women in India do not enjoy a respectable position. They are considered to be secondary and are marginalized- a plaything in the hands of their husbands, protectors or lord beings. Fatima Bi is caught in the cruel clutches of Ali Mohammad. He tortures and beats her regularly. She is mother of seven children and leading a very poor and miserable life, still Ali forces her to give birth to his

eighth child. Perhaps it shows poor people in India believe that children will contribute to family income and share the burden and responsibilities. He clearly tells Priscilla "I decide how my wife conducts her life." Pointing out the deplorable condition of Indian women in her poem entitled *Christmas in Zailgarh*, Priscilla writes:

"They go back to their little huts
Roll out the chapattis for dinner
Pour the children drink of sewer water
Serve their men first, eat what is left
If they are lucky, and then submit unprotected
To the heaving thrusts of their protectors." (15)

Apart from the treatment of the issues above discussed, the novel also highlights violence against women. Sundri- the married sister of Kadambari, a helper with Priscilla Hart, is a hapless prey of male-dominated society. Her husband, Rupesh, and mother-in-law regularly beat her. She is called a witch though the dowry of worth rupees one lakh is given at the time of her marriage; still she receives disgust and hatred. Her pregnancy is no longer an acceptable excuse for not doing the chores they want her to do. Rupesh's mother says: "What use of this woman who does not work around the house and cannot even produce a son" (48). Moreover, her cruel husband and mother-in-law have tried to bludge her. It shows that in our culture we worship women, and talk about giving a respectable status to women, but in reality we hardly care for this. There is wide gap between rhetoric and real world. Ours is gender biased society. The son is worshipped while the daughter is supposed to be a burden.

Last but not least, Indians are superstitious. A typical Hindu believes in myths, stars and astrology. Geeta, Lakshman's wife is an emblematic representative of such types of people. She is very religious as well as superstitious. When she comes to know that her husband has decided to move away with Priscilla to USA. She goes to swami ji in the temple of Lord Shiva. She prays, undergoes fasts and seeks blessings from divine world to save her relationship. She asks swami ji to conduct a special pooja for her to help her keep her husband. She says: "...use tantra, do the tandva, use anyone and anything

you want, swami ji, but please don't let this foreign devil woman run away with my husband..." (227). Even Indians believe in fairies and ghosts. Lakshman rightly says: "In India, myths and legends are very slow to die" (47). Kotli- Zailgarh's only authentic historical sight is a haunted building. Nevertheless, here Lakshman and Priscilla enjoy their rendezvous every Tuesday and Saturday. It is quite isolated place, far away from the town. It is believed that the owner of the kotli was murdered in his bed by his wife and her lover. But he never let them enjoy the fruits of their villainy. "He haunted the house, wailing and shrieking and gnashing his teeth, until he had driven them away in terror. No one would live there after that, so it just fell into disuse" (47).

To conclude in *Riot* Tharoor seeks to examine the some of the most vital issues of our day on a small canvas. It is dedicated to all those people who feel ashamed to be Indian and have grudges against Indian cultural and social values. Tharoor has taken pains in doing his best at pointing out the situation and the history of unrest existing between two-religions and a love story of cross- cultural beings. It raises issues beyond the specificities of time, place and culture to illuminate larger questions: Who are we? By what do we define ourselves? What do we hate? Why do we hate? What are we prisoners of? "Each character in the novel", says Tharoor "raises these complicated questions and it is for the reader to find the answers because the questions concern each one of us."⁸

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