



History as Narrative in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*



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History is no more confined to a monolithic collection of facts and their hegemonic interpretations but has found a prominent space in narratives. The recent surge in using narrative in contemporary history has given historical fiction a space in historiography. With Hayden White's definition of history as a "verbal structure in the form of a narrative prose discourse" literature is perceived to be closer to historiography, in the present age (ix). History has regained acceptance and popularity in the guise of fiction, as signified by the rising status of historical fiction in the post colonial literary world.

Riot (2001), Shashi Tharoor's third novel is set in the context of a fictitious riot that has semblance to the riot that rocked Uttar Pradesh in 1989 as an aftermath of the Babri Masjid-Ram Janmabhoomi controversy. Tharoor unravels the history of communal India from the fictional context of the investigation of the death of a twenty-four year old idealistic American girl, Priscilla Hart, who was slain in India in the riot. From its premises, Tharoor also communicates his ideas "about ownership of history, cultural collision, religious fanaticism and the impossibility of knowing the truth" (*Riot*, Blurb, Viking-Penguin 2001). The Hindu-Muslim relationship in India is one that transfigured from unity to enmity. The early Muslim conquest of the subcontinent, the British rule in the eighteenth century and



the partition of the nation in 1947 are historical events that have been ingrained in the minds of Indians. These issues are kept alive by the constant tensions that prevail between India and Pakistan (2008 Mumbai attacks) and the recent attempts to restore and recapture temples allegedly destroyed by Muslims which culminated in the Babri Masjid incident. Indian constitution states that it is a secular state but ironically communal violence of various kinds has become a recurring phenomenon in India even in the twentieth-first century (2002 Gujarat riots to 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots). In Tabish Khair's study of the *Riot*, he specifies that the term 'communal' in India has come to mean the pan-national communities of the Hindus and Muslims and states that "Tharoor's concerned examination of the anatomy of a largely fictional riot is constructed on the basis of the depiction of the pan-national categories of 'Muslim' and 'Hindu' and is "a reasoned critique of Hindu nationalism and Muslim communalism" that has enveloped the country (306).

M.J. Akbar in his account on the study of certain riots in India has stated that history is one of the causes for the communal frenzy in India; a history which has been perverted and misused by religious zealots. "Law and order have two enemies: the Full Truth and the Complete Lie. When people realize the truth, they start revolutions. When they are fed lies they begin meaningless riots" (18). Most of the time, truths from history are doctored by agents of power. This may be done for various reasons. And when these truths are related to historically momentous events, the veracity of the facts becomes a great concern. The demolition of Babri Masjid on December 9, 1992 is one such that "It precipitated a sense of crisis and provoked fundamental questioning in many aspects of public and political life in South Asia. One of these was history-writing, which was directly implicated in the affair" (Chatterjee,34). To some extent Tharoor's *Riot* is an effort to impart historical understanding by contextualizing Indian history through narrative. It exposes the politics of history that has infused the thoughts and actions of individuals, classes, communities, and of society in the recent history of India. For as Lord Acton (1952), in his opinion on the corruptive effect of power, stated "History is not a web woven with innocent hands" (239).



The narrative is the highlight of the novel *Riot*. “Tharoor's quest for novelty continues in *Riot*”, states a review (Ramlal Agarwal WLT, 141). The narrative techniques that Tharoor employs are methods that an author consciously uses to tell his story because an author “cannot choose whether or not to affect his reader’s evaluation by his choice of narration, he can only choose whether to do it well or poorly.” (Booth, 69). Nevertheless in *Riot*, the author uses his narrative techniques not to solely tell his story but more so to communicate his concerns to his audience. The context chosen may be fictional but the discursive mode of expression involving opposing viewpoints in specific relation to the historical events offers the historical explanation.

History as a narrative in *Riot* unfolds at two interrelated levels: the inner level, narrated by the characters and the outer level, constructed and designed by the implied author from where he communicates to his audiences, implied and real. Both are in search of truths from the past.

The inner level of narrative unfolds as an investigation of an American journalist Randy Diggs, South Asia Correspondent of the New York Journal doing a story for the western media and who accompanies Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart, the divorced parents of Priscilla Hart from United States of America to Zailigarh, Uttar Pradesh, where Priscilla was killed while working as a volunteer in association with an NGO, Help-Us.

Tharoor’s *Riot* at the outer level of its narrative communicates two significant ideas: the unknowability of truths and the notion of ‘Indianness’ in a pluralist society. The events of the narrative which are carefully constructed become the contexts for the purpose of his historical explanations that he intends to communicate to his audience. The most powerful feature of the narrative is the positioning of the characters who serve as the voices of truth in the respective fictional contexts. Kearns contented that “context and the positions of



voice and audience...are primarily characteristic of the type of discourse use that is meant to be narrative rather than features of texts.” (333). The events in the narrative thus may be categorized as those prior and after Priscilla’s death.

The events prior to Priscilla’s death cover the relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla. Tharoor here brings into context, the cultural history of India, which is strategically placed within Lakshman’s conversations with Priscilla. He lists “five major sources of division in India-language, region, caste, class, and religion” (Riot, 42). Lakshman explains that it is not religion alone that is the dividing factor in India but language also which determined the region in post-independent India. Lakshman then tells Priscilla how the Indian Union became “ethno linguistic entities”, when the government reorganized the states on linguistic lines, a decade after independence, and each became language groups with their own political entities to voice their linguistic identities. Language divided the country into regions of the “overpopulated, illiterate, poor and clamorous” “Hindu-belt” in the North which “is resented by ...the better-educated, more prosperous South. And both are seen as distant and self-obsessed by the neglected-Northeast” (Riot, 42). States are led by chief ministers who were secessionists and agitations in defense of a specific language or group is common within India (Riot 44). He also briefs her about the Hindu-Muslim relationship in India and about social relationships and marriage in India. These familiar details arguably are redundant and they have been criticized as being aimed at the western readership; all the same they reinvent the past and place them in the immediate context of the riot.

The caste divisions that have an influence on Indian society are also explained by Lakshman to Priscilla. Caste is widely considered as “a Hindu phenomenon” but Tharoor reminds us through the conversation, that it is also present among all the other faiths as well. Priscilla is made to understand, that in a country whose population belong to hundreds of castes and subcastes, the four broad caste divisions, are the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, the Vaishyas and the Sudras and how those outside these were considered the



untouchables. The term Dalit is deciphered along with these details as one that was adopted by the oppressed by giving up Mahatma's reference to them as Harijans as they found it patronizing. In the course of this conversation, Tharoor shares "a detail that's often overlooked: the top three castes account for fewer than twenty percent of the population" and says that it is a "source of division to think about" (Riot, 43).

The events after Priscilla's death are used as contexts to unfold the political background to communalism. The local chauvinistic Hindu fundamental leader Ram Charan Gupta and the Muslim Professor / researcher Mohammed Sarwar, are the characters that are interviewed by the American journalist, Randy Diggs, to make sense of the politics behind the riot. The former represents the Hindu ideology and the latter, the Muslim ideology and in this context the political history of communal India is explained. Amidst these events Priscilla's parents pursue their probe and they are placed in contexts that give historical details of the political climate of the nation post- Emergency.

These contexts prepare the audience to the ensuing riot in the novel and to an understanding of the riot as a potential site of power relations. Having prepared the audience thus, Ram Charan Gupta narrates to Randy Diggs, the immediate details behind the riot that caused Priscilla's death. On September 15, 1989, the Bharatiya Janata party and its militant "Hinduvta' allies had announced the launching of the Ram Silapoojan to build a Ram temple at the disputed site of the Babri Masjid at Ayodhya. Gupta, like the many Hindus of the nation, supported the construction and narrated its history to Randy Diggs with conviction: "Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya...a town in this state...In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore. It is the Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Ram. A fit site for a grand temple...you will see no Ram Janmabhoomi temple there...a Muslim king, the Mughal emperor Babar, not an Indian, a foreigner from Central Asia, he knocked it down. And in its place he built a big mosque...named after him, the Babri Masjid" (Riot,52). This according to him, hurt his



community which suffered “under the Muslim yoke” for hundreds of years. “Then the British came, and things were no better” (Riot,53) and the same remained even after independence.

He explains how, many Muslims left Ayodhya for Pakistan and the mosque was no longer relevant there. At that time “a miracle occurred...devotees found an idol of Ram...in the courtyard of the mosque” which was considered a “a clear sign from God” to have a temple “to be rebuilt on that sacred spot” (Riot,53). Gupta claimed that the matter was taken to the courts but they were denied justice as they were “all atheists and communists in power” and “people who have lost their roots”. Hence the Hindus have decided to rebuild the temple “with bricks - *sila*...from every corner... bearing the name of Ram...consecrated...worshipped...and then brought to Ayodhya” (53). And he wanted Diggs to know that there were many like-minded Hinduvta preachers like Sadhvi Rithambra who said, “Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it up into pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away” (Riot,57). These are the historical facts that Gupta and his like believed in; one of the many strands in the web of truth.

Sarwar depicts the two different images of Muslims in India- the one before independence and the other, after independence. Mohammed Sarwar, a liberal historian was in Zailgarh to conduct research on the life of Syed SalarMasudGhasi, a respected Muslim warrior, considered a saint in Zailgarh by both the communities. Sarwar was traumatized by the controversy that had risen from the Ramjanambhoomi – BabriMajid issue. During India’s struggle against the British regime, the Muslims were a strong force but as India’s freedom and its partition happened together, Muslims were held responsible for the carnage and were ever since discriminated within the country. Sarwar, retorts “Muslims didn’t partition the country-the British did, the Muslim league did, the Congress party did” (111).



In his defense he quotes from Maulana Azad 's speech when he was made President of the Indian National Congress in 1940 to assert that Muslims loved and belonged to India as much as the Hindus. His words represent the thought process of every Muslim in India:“I (Muslims) am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India” (108). Like in *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor portrays Jinnah as being solely responsible for the partition, for Azad in this speech confesses that every fiber of his “being revolted against the thought of dividing India on communal lines” and his principal rival for the allegiance of India’s Muslims was Jinnah” (107). Azad was dumped by Jinnah as “a Muslim showboy” and Sarwar laments that “he was a far more authentic representative of Indian Islam than Jinnah, and it is part of the great tragedy of this country’s Muslims that it was Jinnah who triumphed and not Azad” (109). Sarwar quotes Mohammed Currim Chagla, India’s Foreign Minister in 1965 who said that “Pakistan was conceived in sin and is dying in violence” and M.J.Akbar, the editor of the Telegraph who denounced Jinnah as having ‘sold the birthright of the Indian Muslims” (109). Sarwar’s convictions are another set of strands in the web of history.

Indian Muslims have become helpless victims to this segment of the country’s past. The Babri-Masjid incident in 1992, the Bombay riots that followed in the wake of this event in December 1992 and January 1993, the inter-communal violence in Gujarat in 2002, and the 2013 Muzaffarnagar riots are all repercussions of the past that has left the Indian Muslims unsettled in their own land. Sarwar captures this pain when he tells Diggs, about the “change in the dominant ethos of the country, in the attitudes of mind that define what it means to be Indian” “seeing more and more the demonization of a collectivity” (113). He speaks of the intellectual cancer of thinking of as “us” and “them” that has afflicted the national mind (114). The Hindu chauvinists are the dividing forces trying to invent a new past for the nation with false evidences and details that degrade the Muslim community. “Why should today’s Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done four



hundred and fifty years ago? “If the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same way in the 1980s?.. on the Muslims of today who did not perpetrate the injustices of the past and who are in no position to inflict injustice upon you today” (146). Commenting on the misuse of history Tharoor opined “Many clashes and conflicts occur as a result of contending narratives, and these narratives are often based on recapitulations of history, in some cases, contrived to make a point for its contemporary relevance and often not in a constructive way (Tharoor, *Of Novels and Nations*).

Colonial historiography also comes under attack when Gupta accuses the “so-called secularists in Delhi” who have been saying that there is no proof that the Ram Janmabhoomi stood where the Babri Masjid stands as those “who only know what Western textbooks have taught them” (120). Quoting plenty of historical evidence for his claims, Gupta explains to Diggs how ancient truth in India passed down orally- “Ours is an oral tradition, and our tradition tells us that this is where Ram was born” (120). “Who cares what proof these leftist historians demand when so many believe they know the truth? (121). Gupta believes and makes others of his ilk affirm that it is important to restore the pride of the local people in their own traditions, Gods, and their own worth by rebuilding the temple. He vehemently tells Diggs that: ‘No matter how many lives have to be sacrificed to ensure it. Our blood will irrigate the dusty soil, our sweat will mix the cement instead of water, but we will build the temple...This light will not be easily put out. It will shine, yes, and it will illuminate the whole of India with its flame” (124).

The case of Priscilla’s death is summarily ended as “simply in the wrong place at the wrong time” (Riot,265). However at the end of the novel, each of the characters had a truth to claim as the cause behind Priscilla’s death. Mrs.Hart from a conversation with Lakshman gauged his relationship with her daughter when he used a phrase that she had read in a letter from Priscilla. She suspects that as a cause yet concludes that Priscilla was perhaps



“surprised by criminals, or surprised them in the act” (Riot,260). Lakshman’s journal recorded another hidden truth; that Priscilla was carrying his child, which was suppressed by his friend Gurinder in the postmortem. Priscilla met Fatima Bi, a woman with seven children, “exhausted from childbearing and child-rearing” and whose husband Ali, refused to let her use any protection against pregnancy (Riot, 159). When she helped Fatima Bi abort her eighth child, Priscilla suffered Ali’s wrath who threatened to kill her. He also becomes a suspect in the murder. “So many possibilities” concludes Ram Charan Gupta (Riot,262). These perspectives are foregrounded in Tharoor’s narrative to validate that history and therefore the formation of identities is not absolute truth.

As communalism in India has been grounded on political and religious motives, both are expounded in the narrative. Historical facts related to both are unraveled in specific contexts of the narrative. Tharoor in *Riot* makes an attempt to defy “the distinction between the historian and the novelist stressing the contingency of all historical knowledge” (Shelley Walia, The Tribune). “But who owns India’s history? Are they my history and his, and his history about my history? ‘ this according to Tharoor is the ‘whole thing about Ram Janmabhoomi agitation ...about reclaiming of history of 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? (Riot 110). According to Romila Thapar “there will be enough historical concerns growing out of the multiple aspects of our society to ensure that the Indian mind is never closed”(111).

Tharoor’s narrative in *Riot* thus show that the concept of narrative representations of history, in the changing world has far-reaching consequences for narratology, exploring the potential of narrative to bridge disciplines, in ways that may in turn throw new light on Indian historiography. As Gerard Prince contends, “narratology has made it clear that, a narrative can have any number of functions and there are some functions that it excels or is unique at fulfilling (129). The narrative has thus contributed towards defining the ethos of the new millennium literature from the Indian subcontinent.



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