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A Study of Tharoor's *Riot* from Historical Perspective

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***Abstract:** Shashi Tharoor's 'Riot' denounces history's reductive comprehension of multiple realities, as history's disciplinary sense tends to undermine a sense of extremely intricate social causation. In so doing, 'Riot' as a document participates in the post-modern and post-colonial project of interrogating prioritized discursive narratives and historio-graphical hegemony. This stance binds the novel with the theoretical postulates of postmodern critics who, in different ways, challenged the ontological, epistemological status of history and thus problematized the notions of history, historicity and historiography. The present paper is an attempt to place Tharoor's 'Riot' in the matrix of history and literature to explicate the nature and function of the same.*

***Keywords:** Hegemony, History, Historiography, Post colonialism.*

Published in 2001, Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is an interesting mixture of fact and fiction presented through various narrative modes. The plot revolves around the death of Priscilla Hart, an American doctoral student working for an NGO in Zalilgarh in Northern India. The novel begins with a newspaper report informing us about the killing of a foreigner in India during a riot. It revisits the site of the incident and reconstructs the circumstances surrounding the death. Along with the main thread of the story that revolves around the affair between Priscilla Hart and V. Lakshman, the Stephen's educated District Magistrate, the narrative also includes perspectives on the socio-cultural milieu and political traditions that influence and shape the environment of the Indian subcontinent. The theme while focusing on the killing, also involves a certain amount of background regarding the origins of communal discord and also the ideologies of the successive governments. The deliberations of the characters like Prof. Mohammed Sarwar,



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the History teacher of Delhi University and Ram Charan Gupta, the Hindu fanatic, help realize the thematic concerns of the novel. It includes other characters like Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart, the parents of the dead student who come to India in an effort to understand the reasons behind the murder. Randy Diggs, the New York Journal reporter who wants to do a feature story on the dead person, conducts his own investigation. Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police and minor characters like Mr. Das and Kadambri add to the profile giving a chance for a more comprehensive picture of the personal aspects regarding the case to emerge.

There is an emphasis placed on the generic term 'the novel' in the title of the book. The contravention of the norms regarding the conventions of the genre could, in fact, give the entire work an appearance of an event or a case record, extracts from a diary or a monograph. The definition of 'the novel' as extended by Tharoor could also be taken to include the afterword and acknowledgement, which contributes to the background on the textual production. The factual detail lends an aura of credibility with reference to the ground realities of similar scenarios. Another interesting aspect of the novel's production is the different covers adopted for release in the Western and the Indian markets. While the Indian cover has an image of a deserted street post-riot; the visual text on the American cover emphasizes certain stereotypical images associated with the Orient, with its image of a domed palace and Mughal tapestries. Broadly speaking, *Riot* conflates personal events with political history by presenting a non-linear narrative and tampers with the notion of causality that is the basis of the historical documentation process. It is a complex admixture of journal and diary entries, interview transcripts, dialogic moments, personal notes, letters and news clippings. Furthermore, textual divisions are the moments of reconstruction that attempt to detail the background behind the killing of Priscilla Hart. While official sources conclude the incident as related to the riots that took place in the town of Zailgarh, the reader knows that a far more personal tragedy underlies the sequence of events that culminate in the killing.

Riot is an attempted reconstruction through a series of textual moments intended to throw light on the murder of the American student. In this process, the riot is not seen by the author as



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an isolated experience but an entire nation's history and socio-cultural ethos is brought to bear on the particular textual moment which examines the fundamental basis for the Hindu-Muslim communal divide and the reasons for the widely prevalent conflagrations in the subcontinent. The issue is complicated when Tharoor offers divergent perspectives on history by people like Prof. Mohammed Sarwar and Ram Charan Gupta. The author seems intent on creating probable and divisive sub-texts by giving scope for counter views against the analysis of the individual concerned. In the case of the History Professor, opportunity is given to those so inclined to question his views based on his reading from a minority status. As a Hindu fanatic it is through his recourse to mythic and fabular laments and its perception as mainstream history, that the author subverts the operative notions of accepted history. Tharoor, by simultaneously offering divisive and variant notions of the historical impetus, brings into sharp focus the limitations of historical knowledge that is at best seen as a creative discourse which actively survives with the nebulous notions of truth and reality. In other words, *Riot* characterizes historical narratives as inventions or fictions "which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences", avers White (60). Implied is the notion that history, like literary text, is a fictional construct that is open to interpretation and that 'writing' history inevitably involves the use of formal literary devices such as emplotment, tropes, narratives, intertextualities and diegesis.

In effect, *Riot* blurs the existing boundaries between fiction/fact, history/literature, universal/particular, and aesthetics/politics. The limitation of the historical process is directly brought out in the implicit understanding that the circumstantial overview is never complete. To overcome such a limitation, the author brings in various points of view to illumine the actual details behind the death. Such a critical stand provides an explorative possibility between the Muslim or the Hindu fanatics or even the third option that is not made apparent. The only finality in the novel is the resistance to closure; one does not know what set of circumstances conclusively led to the killing of this 'idealist', one more statistic claimed by the frequent bouts of irrationality sweeping the populace. The hostility and extreme behavior characterizing those



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concerned is evident in Ali's outburst against the members of the HELP-US programme which neatly plays into Ram Charan Gupta's doomsday prophesying of a dominant Muslim majority. A lot of figures are tossed about to lend that much needed semblances of authenticity to the arguments. Demographics and related social and anthropological endeavours are implicated by the author in the process of cultural destabilization evident in *Riot*. What this does is to negate notions of impeccability entertained by a vast public regarding statistics and archival documentation. The most cutting reminder of such an exercise would be the inability of the texts fact file to authentically document the murder of Priscilla Hart leading to a large degree of uncertainty regarding the case.

Riot becomes conclusive proof of the inadequacy of the documentation process and the recorded facts. If at one level, it throws open the question of causality with reference to a particular and personal history, then it also highlights in extension of the inadequacies of the historical paradigms. The more fundamental question perhaps explored in the novel is the question of what exactly constitutes history. As far as Hindu fanatics like Ram Charan Gupta are concerned, they are clear in their view of Hindu myths and legends associated with texts like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* as part of mainstream historical discourse:

In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple any more. It is the Ram Janmabhoomi, the birth place of Ram.... In the olden days great temples stood 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, which was named after him the Babri Masjid (52).

The act of the riot would be an instance where personal and political spaces collapse in real terms. Tharoor, in the novel, shows how these spaces intersect constantly and examines the nature of an act that though impersonal at one level has immense bearing on subjective histories that frame personal angst. This situation is akin to what the narrator faces in Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines* where the riot becomes a personal marker or is a site of disjuncture that marks the point of departure from an alternate time/space continuum that helps the characters cope with the



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loss. But, it loses its political significance, as it does not form a part of mainstream archives. The case in *Riot* is different, as the death of a foreigner has sparked sufficient international attention on an event that could be seen as mundane given the political scenario of the subcontinent. Thus, it becomes a well-documented proceeding, given the involvement of the text itself. The reductivism of the status of the subject into another impersonal signifier is counter-availed by the author's conversion of the historical documentation process to a fictional enterprise. The a-chronological notations in the novel can be seen as a process of filling in historio-graphical gaps or an 'absence' in the domain of history. The unifying action that connects all the textual moments is the death of Priscilla Hart. The positioning of the newspaper articles towards the beginning and the end is also suggestive of the enterprise to recreate what transpired during that particular time frame. The ghostly presence of Priscilla Hart during the course of the novel could be seen as an attempt to revisit the site of disjunction at a particular moment in time. The fictional framework emphasized by Tharoor simultaneously aids the reconceptualisation of the historical framework and fits it into the unified time/space spectrum explicated by the conventions of the 'genre' and the physical limits of the actual object of the novel.

By fictionalizing a historical narrative, the author distances, himself from the requirement of the causality implicit in the genre of realistic fiction. The historical discourse would not be a unified mainstream progression as typically conceived, but would be one among various discourses open to interrogation. In short, there is a strategic attempt to realign historical methodologies/cartographies of histories through these voices/narratives and the theoretical discourses they engender. This cerebral estranges the political idealism of historical accounts and informs the epistemological limits of history. Such an interventionist politics inhabits, says Jameson, an, "interrogation of Hegelian causality and homogeneity of historical narratives to establish schizophrenic disjunction in historical knowledge" (29). The project of fictional narrativization also ends as a part of the archives within the rubric of the novel, when Lakshman refers to the process of novel writing and quotes the instance of Tharoor's own book, *The Great Indian Novel*, "I've



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read about this chap who's just reinvented the Mahabharata as twentieth-century story-epic style, oral tradition, narrative digressions, the lot" (126). He goes on to detail the entire creative process arriving at a notion of truth that is the crux of the fictional historicisation. To Priscilla's query regarding the reader's understanding of truth comes "the truth! The singular thing about truth my dear, is that you can only speak of it in the plural... Truth is elusive, many sided..." (137).

The notion is given a truth that functions at various levels; it remains for the reader to be co-opted to the whole process. So, we have the simultaneous interplay of fact and fiction throughout *Riot*, while the references to official records force the readers to undertake a deeper and more subtly nuance reading presented by the novel. The vignettes interspersed with the play of the universal/particular and fact/fiction force the reader out of a complacent and passive response to the text and simultaneously enable the reader to rethink the generally accepted notions of the creative impulse, as tempered by the socio-political milieu. The space of the novel becomes a site of play for parallel/alternative histories based on a series of reconstructive attempts by various characters. Through this poly-vocality the text fills in a certain need by engaging with 'the void' created by the prioritized history and also opens itself to the same criticism by the selection of specific recorded events to the exclusion of others. But, it gets beyond this subversion by virtue of its creating a fictional narrative to fill in the gap with all that 'fiction' implies. Thus, *Riot* finally, by the very nature of its content, characterizes the production of history as another narrative and creative enterprise.

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