

COLLISION OF CULTURAL IDEOLOGIES IN THE NOVEL- RIOT

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Abstract:

The genesis of the book may be traced to the simmering Hindu-Muslim discontent of the 1980's culminating in the Babri Masjid violence at Ayodhya. In particular, Shashi Tharoor has in mind the description of a riot that actually broke in 1989 in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. Simultaneously, the report of the death of American woman in a different part of the world: in South Africa, a social worker, who had gone there to help the cause of the blacks, was ironically killed by a black youth. In Riot, the two incidents coalesce into a single event: the death of Priscilla Hart, a volunteer from the United States working for a population-control awareness program, killed in a communal riot that breaks out in a small Indian town. This central event merges into a larger network of ideas with other related issues, all of which are worked into the narrative of Riot. The background is the Hindu-Muslim riots over the Ram Shila Pujan but, unlike The Great Indian Novel, Tharoor here chooses to work on a small canvas, a small, dusty town called Zalilgarh. At the same time, the story reaches out across narrow confines, taking into its purview two antipodal, culturally disparate continents, individuals and situations.

Tharoor is concerned with innovative forms of narration: conspicuous by its absence is the conventional 'once upon a time' story, the 'dear reader...' approach, or the omniscient narrator. 'Down with the omniscient narrator. It's time for the omniscient reader,' says a character in the novel, making Tharoor's attempt a self-conscious exploration of narration drawing the reader into the act of decoding of the story. *Riot* is not a conventionally structured novel: there is no formal beginning or end, no linearity or narrative or plot or formal constructions of the genre. It is more of a collage that brings together many different fragments of a jigsaw puzzle that the reader must put together to form a coherent whole. The pieces comprise an astonishing variety - there are diary entries, letters, memoirs, excerpts from scrapbooks and journals, transcripts of interviews, conversations overheard, entries in notebooks, journalistic reports, a handful of poems, even a birthday card and a cable. All the various pieces of the collage are different takes on a central event - the death of Priscilla Hart. How did she and what were the circumstances? The reader is faced with the task of groping through the evidence and unraveling the story. At times, one has the uneasy feeling of being a voyeur peeping into a private chamber, reading another's personal diaries or letters, or eavesdropping into somebody else's very special, very intimate encounters. But the embarrassment is not allowed to linger, as almost immediately, there is a swing toward the impersonal, an interview conducted by an objective reporter, the official voice of police personnel in charge, or simply, a shift of perspective. All this is part of the narrative strategy. The story is not told to us, but it is shown through the pieces of the collage.

At the same time, what *Riot* seeks to present is not simply a whodunit tale or the story of the poignant death of a visiting American. It goes beyond mere statistics, beyond the factual details of the tragedy, to be reconstruct the emotional life of the woman sketched vividly in a scrapbook that she maintains: the idealism that brought her to that remote spot, the passion for her job, the love interest in her life, the secret rendezvous from time to time, the uncertainty and the agony of entering into a doomed love affair. Her paramour, Lakshman, a local Indian administrator, who is married but finds himself involved in

a relationship with the American, is also a writer of sorts and keeps his own journal. So there are two different perspectives on the relationship. The clash of cultures, the divergent viewpoints, the inability to understand the working of the other's mind, the imminent end of the relationship - all this comes across through the personal journals of the main characters of the novel. Despite the passion and the love, social pressures are far too strong for a lasting relationship. And then violence erupts, causing Priscilla's death and putting an abrupt end to the possibilities of the love story.

One of the main concerns of the novel is history as it is lived in a particular space and time. And history is nothing but truth.

Riot is about the ownership of truth and history. It presents about a dozen versions of a given situation, no single one being privileged over the other. If the story is told or presented from Lakshman's and Priscilla's points of view, it is also presented from the varying points of view of the other characters: the staunch Hindutva supporter, the Muslim activist, the police official, the grieving parents of the riot victim, the wronged wife, etc. Their separate stories contribute toward the various pieces of the jigsaw puzzle called the truth or history - the puzzle that Tharoor presents as *Riot*. Tharoor seems to suggest that history is not a web woven by innocent hands. The different pieces of the collage in his novel are often divergent, often contradictory accounts of the same event. Yet each has its validity, its own truth, and its own beauty.

Riot is a departure from his previous works - less satirical and more of an exploration of religion, cultural differences, and especially, human relationships. Summing it up in a single sentence, Tharoor says that the book is about love, hate, the clash of cultures, the ownership of history, and the impossibility of knowing the truth. Here, for the first time in his novels, he introduces an American character around whom the action will revolve - a woman who is killed in a communal riot at the beginning of the novel. The rest of the narrative provides different perspectives on this central event.

To study the mechanics of a communal riot, Tharoor accessed a report written by a college friend who was a senior officer in the Indian Administrative Services during a similar riot in Madhya Pradesh. However, the novel is not a dry summary of statistics of impersonal data: on the contrary, it takes the episode from an intimate angle, focusing on a personal relationship that becomes entangled in a larger political imbroglio. At the same time, it experiments with various forms of narration: the narrative presents an assortment of fragments, bits and pieces of information, transcripts of interviews, newspaper reports and other factual data: these pieces form a collage, all fragments presenting different aspects of the central event - the death of woman called Priscilla Hart. How did she die and what were the circumstances? The story is shown through the pieces of collage like canvas, the mode of narration being as unusual as the tale itself.

Although he is located in the Western world, Tharoor's frequent trips to India and his emotional attachments to his country ensure that he is at home in both these worlds that have awarded him unstinted recognition. While there is no denying that he is a formidable talent on the present literary scene, he has been more fortunate than most of his contemporaries in the awards his works have received, both in India and in the West.

Tharoor has been generous, unlike most of his predecessors in giving interviews about his writings and literary theories. This enables readers to appreciate his works better - sometimes, arguably, with mathematical precision. In an interview with Sunil Sethi, he claims that, unlike his earlier two satirical novels, this novel is to be taken seriously and that takes itself seriously. He also adds that it focuses on collisions of various sorts - between individuals, between cultures, between ideologies and between religions. He goes on to say that the novel by focusing on one place, one time, a small group of people helps illuminate the kind of issues he wants to talk about - our identity and communalism and so on to showcase the multiplicity of perspectives, since people are disputing the ownership of history and trying to uncover the truth behind a certain event.

It is a novel that flows and ebbs like the tide. It is an attempt to put Indian readers to self-examination. This book is a beautiful amalgamation of all the nine elements - love, hate, joy, sorrow, pity, disgust, courage, pride and compassion.

The novel's greatest virtue is that without being pedantic didactic, it presents an accurate picture of the thinking of the various forces that are competing for supremacy in contemporary India. The secular administrator's view of a benign India; the militant Hindu's view filled with grievances of the past, some real, some imaginary; the secular Muslim's view of believing in a united India; the police officer's view of an ungovernable yet functioning anarchy.

Tharoor always believes that the very word novel implies that there must be something new about each one. What was new to him about the way *Riot* unfolded was that he told the story through newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals, scrapbooks, even poems written by the characters - in other words, using different voices, different stylistic forms, for different fragments of the story.

But throughout it was clear to him that the story of *Riot* was a story of various kinds of collisions of people, of cultures, ideologies, loves, hatreds - and it could not be told from just one point of view.

He knows this will strain credulity, but he actually did not think much about. Of course he was aware that Priscilla Hart might be seen as one more in the long line from Adela Quested through Daphne Manners and on, but he was writing about a different period, the colonial connection was absent and there was no rape metaphor in his novel! he is on record as asking, with reference to those earlier novels, why, if rape had to be a literary metaphor for the colonial connection, a British woman had to be the victim of it rather than an Indian. His novel is not about a torrid east-west encounter in a colonial setting; it's about today's people in our increasingly globalizing world, where collision and confluence seamlessly cross national and ethnic boundaries.

The novel is about a number of forms of collision and penetration, and the attempts to inject coke into India worked as useful metaphor in various ways.

Like his two previous novels, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), and *Show Business* (1992), *Riot* holds up yet another mirror to India's contemporary social and political history, the frame a specific town in a particular year and a context that continues to make the secular heart bleed.

The novel, says Tharoor, 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?

Asked how he blended his portrayal of real Indian characters with four American characters in the novel, including the central one of Priscilla's .

Conclusion

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 / fictions which have more in common with their counterparts in literature than they have with those in the sciences. 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 nature of an act that though impersonal at one level has immense bearing on subjective histories that frame personal angst.

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