

SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT: A LOVE STORY- COPIOUS IN HISTORICAL REFERENCES

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Abstract:

In the wake of communal tensions over the Ram Janam Bhoomi/Babri Masjid issue in the fictional town of Zalilgarh, in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India when eight people died, including an American volunteer named, Parcilla Hart who had nothing to do with the riot is the theme of the novel, *Riot: A Love Story*, published in 2001. It paints a vivid picture of the historical and cultural nuances of India. The book features copious historical references to present India, including the emergency, ban on Coca-Cola, Khalistan, Ram Sila Poojan, and Gazhi Miya, among others. The study examines how the novel revisits history in the light of New Historicism.

Key Words: fiction, riot, revisit, history, new historicism,

Introduction

The setting for Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot: A Love Story* is at Zalilgarh, an imaginary district headquarters in the State of Uttar Pradesh, where Hindus and Muslims clash in a riot over Ram Shila Poojan in India on September 15, 1989. The book is a combination of a beautiful love story between two worlds—the Oriental and the Western. The book depicts modern Indian history of the 1990s with a cultural coating that adheres to the New Historicist school of thought.

Tharoor apart from working as an international civil servant, by ensuring peace and world order and at the same time involves in depicting his creative abilities in blending fiction with history. In the novel 'Riot' by structuring it into the form of a chronicle. The guiding principle of New Historicism is that no one can stay unaffected by history.

The historical situation is essentially unavoidable. History is something that is created from previously published or established stuff and is not something that is intended to be accurate if it is obvious. In contrast to the fiction work *Riot*. It is concerned with intertextuality and combining other texts than with historical dates and events, as history is about telling or narrating about the past and its politics, power, authority and subversion.

Reference of History in Riot

In the fictional work 'Riot', Tharoor uses fiction as a selection tool to review history from a variety of viewpoints with astounding impartiality and a rare presence of irony. He revisits history in the book with a narrative of re-examining accepted history to update it with new, accurate or less biased information. His point of view is that there are many histories rather than one history.

Tharoor reveals in the book's acknowledgements, that the novel *Riot* is "based on a real story of a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh," Both the fictitious narrative of the riot and the real-life incidents are linked to the Ram Janam Bhoomi/Babri Masjid imbroglio. Along with this main plot, he weaves in historical and fictional elements by referencing the Coca-Cola ban in India, the Khalistan movement, the worship of Gaizi Miyan, a North Indian composite culture, and other topics.

Tharoor confirms in one of his interviews with *The Indian Express*: "I've been immensely, emotionally and intellectually intrigued by the notion of India, by the forces that have moulded and produced India, and by the forces that have occasionally threatened to unmake it" (2005: p.11)

Riot is about history, love, hate, cultural clashes, religious fanaticism, cultural historicism, and the existence of several truths. Resulting in not just one but multiple histories. In writing this book as a historian, Shashi Tharoor assumes the role of an investigator. In the book, he uses examples from journalistic reporting, diary writing, and interviews to illustrate how reality may be seen from several

angles. His deconstruction of history involves upsetting the status quo. Whatever the existing order of things may be—social, political, cultural, religious, or historical—he challenges it.

Regarding the novel, Tharoor says: “The themes that concern me in this novel: love and hate; cultural collision, in particular, 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, finally, issues of the unknowability of history, how identities are constructed through an imagining of history; and, finally, perhaps, the unknowability of the truth”. (You can’t feel, 2004: 01)

Historical References

The murder of an American volunteer who is employed by a non government organisation "HELP-US" marks the beginning of the book. ' Parcilla Hart, a 24-year-old Manhattan girl, is stabbed to death in Zalilgarh town, on the outskirts of New Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India, according to The New York Journal's late edition dated Monday 2, October 1989. The news item's headline reads, "American slain in India." The newspaper also claims that the killing has taken place during a riot while Hindu and Muslim clash in the town, following the Ramajanma Bhoom/Babri Masjid dispute.

The made-up murder of American volunteer Parcilla Hart serves as an example of how mindless violence may harm innocent people. She is murdered despite the fact that she has no animosity toward either Muslims or Hindus. She is good with both the communities. Everyone in Zalilgarh is baffled as to why she is killed. She is just erred in being at the wrong place at the wrong time, as the American consulate regrets. *Meetha* Mohammad, a local boy who sells tea for his lively hood is also killed. These two victims of the riot of Zalilgarh never belonged to any particular political or religious group yet they are punished. The novel dramatises how inhumane riots have been throughout history effecting normal people who become the victims.

Tharoor describes how riots start and spread like a wild fire in the book. On the day of the riot, a procession moves slowly through the narrow lanes of the town of Zalilgarh in response to a call from a religious organisation. The entire incident, in the form of a formal report is narrated by Lakshman, the district magistrate to Randy Diggis, an American journalist travelling to Zalilgarh to get the inside story on Parcilla Hart's murder for American readers, and by Gurinder Singh, the district superintendent of police- the government representatives. The District Magistrate describes how the procession moves on with pounding feet, shouting slogans, and precisionists brandishing blades and hurling insults. When it is presumed that the parade is moving peacefully a bomb attack, followed by the orders to open fire have occurred at the procession. Zalilgarh sees the break of a major riot at its door step. Eight people are killed, 47 are injured, and hundreds of thousands of dollars' worth of property is damaged during the violence.

Tharoor narrates the happenings on the day of riot, through his characters Lakshman, while Diggis recording he says, in 20 minutes time seven people are killed in the procession day, scores of people injured and nearly hundred houses and commercial establishments are set ablaze six deaths are caused by the daggers and one person who dies in the riot is killed in a bomb explosion. “In riots, all sorts of things happen, people strike first and ask questions later.” says the superintendent of Police of the district.

Professor Sarwar vocalizes his voice for the “composite culture” or “composite religiosity” 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.,

Through the story of Salar Mausaud Ghazi, also known as Ghazi Miyan and likely to be a representative of Sufi tradition, the novel depicts the composite culture of North India where both Hindus and Muslims venerate heroes and saints. According to popular belief, Ghazi Miyan is a great

warrior and is killed on the battlefield in A.D. 1034, at Bahaich in North India. After his death, he is canonized and people started gathering regularly at his tomb. From Delhi to Varanasi, ballads about his life are sung in the Awadhi and Bhojpuri languages. Various accounts about Ghaiz Miyan are in circulation, and some portray him as a cow protector and some as a cow slaughterer even by some as a jihadi. It is difficult to establish Ghazi's role in history, but a Professor of History, Shahid Amin tries to conclude in this regard by commenting, 'Non-sectarian histories of sectarian strife'

In a series of interviews, with Randy Diggis, Ram Charan Gupta, an active member of a religious political party, offers history from a Hindu chauvinist point of view. His views are representative of the Hindu chauvinist interpretation of history. He always has the impression that Hindus are targeted by the governments and the courts because they are filled with atheists and communists.

He holds Muslims responsible for the partition of India and the creation of Pakistan, resulted in losing the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro. Even he adds the oldest university in the world, Takshashila, as well the Indus River, which gave India its name to Pakistan. Additionally, Gupta disapproves of Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime minister of India, and accuses him of paying Muslims to travel to Mecca and perform prayers.

Ram Charan Gupta's historical perspective is in conflict with that of a Delhi University history professor Mohammed Sarwar. Speaking of Muslims, he emphasises that they are a vital component of India's indivisible oneness, without which the nation cannot exist as a whole. He asserts that Muslims have played a crucial part in the development of India. He claims that Muslims are not responsible for partition but the culprits are the British, the Muslim League, and the Congress Party. He quotes Mohammed Iqbal, who said, 'Ours is in a civilization that will commit suicide out of its complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction' to make the point that if the secular fabric of the society is damaged by fanaticism, the country will meet its doom.

Tharoor offers three distinct historical viewpoints through the characters Lakshman, Ram Charan Gupta and Professor Mohammed Sarwar. While Gupta provides a fanatical Hindu viewpoint, Professor Sarwar offers the Muslim psyche. Lakshman declares that extremism has no place in Hinduism from a secularist stance. He believes it is, in truth, a religion devoid of principles.

Randy Diggis is given a brief overview of every incident relating to Khalistan, the rise of Sant Jarnail Bhindranwale, the assassination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, and its effects on the Sikh community, particularly in the national capital Delhi and its surroundings, by Gurinder Singh, the district superintendent of police of Zailgrh. He refers to this string of incidents as the 1980s' biggest story. Even when compared to the 1947 partition or the 1962 Chinese invasion near to Delhi; '1984 was the worst year in Indian history' as he opines.

Gurinder claims that during the riots, there was a massacre of the Sikh community and that the population was slaughtered through looting. Sikh communities have been destroyed, families murdered, homes set ablaze, and even some people have been burned alive. Some of the mobs even possessed lists of addresses that identified the Sikh-owned residences and businesses. They are all the targets.

Then Gurinder adds the pathetic tale to his narration in which he tells about his personal loss during the riots. The tale is of his nephew, son of his sister a young Navjyoth and his brother in law. They were returning in their Ambassador car from a cricket stadium after the cricketing practice. A rude mob surrounded the car, and immediately Gurinder's brother-in law lockes the car from inside by reassuring his son. The mob spilled petrol on the car and set ablaze. The two in the car asphyxiated, burned choking to death. Then Grinder wanted to leave his job like, but his father prevents him to do so by remembering the words of Mahatm Gandhi during the partition.

Rudyard Hart, the company's business executive and Parcilla Hart's father in the book, introduces the full Coca-Cola episode. Hart describes Coke's existence in India from the start to the ban that followed. In the book, Tharoor presents his in-depth research on FERA, known as the 'Foreign

Exchange Regulation Act' of 1973, which was passed to regulate all business activities involving international trade. Section 229 I of the law mandates that foreign companies apply to the government for registration.

The reason Kotli is abandoned in the real historical account is left unanswered by Tharoor in the novel. Lakshman tells Parcilla Hart the legend surrounding the Kotli, according to which the owner is assassinated in his bed by his wife and her lover. Since then, the Kotli has been visited by his ghost. Since that time, the location has been deserted, cannot be verified in history.

Shashi Tharoor blames the politicians for their power hunger in politics in the novel. He talks about the politicians of India who are the reasons for unrest in the society and division. How the politicians, change everything for their advantage is elaborated in the novel. The politicians exploit the mob psychology in the name of religion. As far as politics are concerned they instead of nurturing the art of governing, becoming the art of exploitation which makes the rule of law as misrule and law leading to lawlessness. The state agencies meant to administer are being misused to mal-administer. The police excesses and bureaucratic immoderation have become evident in the society.

Conclusion

Through the novel Shashi Tharoor exhibits that, no one can claim to be neutral and detached in their excavation of history. It is almost impossible to escape the historical circumstance. The past is not something that square up to us as if it were a palpable thing, but rather something that is constructed from previously written material of various types. History is usually about telling, a narrative about the past while inter textually incorporating other texts. Politics, power and authority are more focused than dates and events in history.

It is apparent that Riot is not a factual depiction of social life but a piece of evidence suggesting that a new literary trend is on the rise. From the earlier works of fiction, the novel Riot, shifts from conveying a fixed reality instead expressing a range of perspectives through which the author explores the connections between historical events. As a result, the novel presents numerous interpretations of the same events, both fictional and real, to demonstrate the complexity of the human experience.

Uma Nair says: "*Riot* skims the misery of solitude and Indian society's social mores, occasionally resurrecting the historic crutches of distrust and divisiveness that we have been left with" (1).

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