
THE BLEND OF FACT AND IMAGINATION IN FICTION

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Abstract:

History is always a conspicuous element in the modern Indian English writings. Many Indian fiction writers choose history to blend it with their imagination- one among them is Shashi Tharoor. He can be considered as a writer obsessed with politics and history in his writings. His novel *Riot: A Love Story* is one of the best illustrations to demonstrate such his obsession. The novel *Riot* is set during 1980-90s of India in the wake of communal violence erupted during the *Ramajanma Bhoomi and Babri Masjid* conflict in India. Along with this central event, Tharoor weaves historical elements such as the Coca-Cola controversy in India, the Khalistan movement, the worship of Gaazi Miyan, a North Indian composite culture and the dark days of the Emergency in the novel. The present paper tries to explore how two important contemporary historical events such as communal violence erupted during Ramasila Poojan and the massacre of Sikhs after the assassination of Indira Gandhi are presented in the novel *Riot*.

Keywords: History, fiction, riot, intertextuality

Introduction:

Shashi Tharoor is one of the prominent writers in drawing the contemporary history in fiction. He investigates the infinite possibilities of history via the lens of imagination, or 'imagination a blend of history,' exploring the limits of fact and imagination to depict modern reality. Both in his fiction and nonfiction, he does a remarkable job of describing and analysing historical events from a broad, human perspective. This his mosaic ability portrays India's limitless variations on the theme of life with each captivating a story, illuminating a distinct facet of Indian culture from politics, religion to history. Among of many Tharoor's fictional works the present paper tries to explore how blend of fact and imagination is done in his one of the works- *Riot: A Love Story*. The back drop for Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is the communal violence between two communities in India in 1989, in the wake of Ram Shila Poojan, and a consequent demolition of Babri Masjid, a 400-year-old mosque.

Shashi Tharoor seems to be exhibiting two lives; as reading *Riot* makes it evident. He seems to be the international peace keeper at the UN by bestowing the

duty of maintaining law and order across the strife driven world and at the same time he also seems to find out a way out of the communalism and violence that mostly afflicted Indian contemporary society. In an interview with the Indian Express he says: "I've been profoundly, emotionally and intellectually attracted by the notion of India, by the forces that have sculpted and made India, and by the forces that have occasionally threatened to unmake it" (2005: 11).

Riot is about love- hate, east-west cultural clash, history-imagination and religious fanaticism, which makes it difficult to find the truth. When it comes to write historical fiction, Tharoor is metamorphosed into a historian. Through the novel, Tharoor presents truth from a number of perspectives, using examples from journalistic reporting, diary writing and interviews which makes the work essentially intertextual. Nothing is missed from his sharp vision while enjoying the chance to criticise the dilemma, whether it be in social, political, cultural, religious or historical terms, even the strongest personalities.

The novel demonstrates history as fiction. The novel clearly shows its flight from being a representation of social reality. Thus *Riot* stands as a clear illustration for the rise of a new perspective in fiction. In the place of expressing a pre-existing worldview, the narrative involves into a discursive development of ideas and a presentation of many perspectives that establish certain relationships to historical episodes. The outcome is- the historical and fictional episodes presented in the narrative deliberate a variety of perspectives and provide multiple versions of historical and fictional reality. On writing *Historicism* Edgar and Sedgwick say "The theory of hegemony was of central importance to the development...the analysis of the ways subordinate groups actively resist and respond to political and economic domination. The subordinate groups needed not to be seen merely as the passive dupes of the dominant class and its ideology" (165).

Shashi Tharoor confesses in the acknowledgements of the novel that, *Riot* is designed on the basis of a true story of a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. The narration begins with a death in mysterious circumstances of an American volunteer, Priscilla Hart. 'The New York Journal' late edition dated Monday, 2, October, 1989 reports under its news item, with the heading 'American slain in India', that Priscilla Hart, a 24 year old Manhattan girl, was stabbed to death in Zailgarh town in the outskirts of New Delhi in the state of Uttar Pradesh, India. She was working as a volunteer with a non-government organisation 'HELP-US'. The newspaper also states that, the killing was occurred during in a riot while communal clash in the town, in the wake of Ramajnamabhoomi- Babri Masjid conflict. This death takes place during the communal violence erupted related to Babri Masjid demolition agitation. The American newspaper reports the death: "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).

Priscilla's worried and divorced parents Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart arrive India to visit Zailgarh—the town of Priscilla's death and the story unfolds with the investigation of an American journalist- Randy Diggs who is looking for a “story” for the western media who come along Harts. Part of his investigation Diggs meets Ram Charan Gupta, the local chauvinistic fundamental leader to investigate the politics behind the riot. Mr. Gupta is for the cause of construction of Ram temple 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 JanamBhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Rama. A fit site for a grand temple....” (52).

Gupta presents his perspective of history about the construction of the temple that since the olden days a temple is there. There are stories that pilgrims across India would come to there to worship Lord Ram. He further adds that, the Muslim ruler, the Mughal emperor Babur, a foreigner from central Asia, knocked it down and on its ruins built a big mosque, which was named after him- the Babri Masjid, during the medieval period. According to Gupta it is a mosque on Hindu's holiest site. Muslims are praying to Mecca on the very spot where divine Lord Ram was born. He feels this makes Hindu community sentiments are to be hurt. Gupta feels Muslims 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).

Tharoor presents the contrary perspective through the character Mohammad Sarwar, a Muslim scholar and a professor in the Department of History, Delhi University to that of Gupta's. Sarwar's argument defends the minority psyche of Muslims. His argument is towards in favour of the “composite culture” or “composite religiosity” of North India. He presents a number of evidences of Muslim religious figures who are being 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, etc. He says: “Indian Muslims suffer disadvantages, even discrimination, in a hundred ways....” (112). According to him there are prejudices in this country. Though India believes in secularism the fundamentalists do not. Sarwar tells Diggs that, the fundamental 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 are trying to teach Muslims a lesson, though they have not learned many lessons themselves.

Sarwar strongly feels that Muslims are an evident part of the indivisible unity of Indian nationality. Without them the splendid composition of India is incomplete. They are the essential element, which has undeniable role of building India. He says: “Muslim didn't partition the country the British did, the Muslim League did, and the Congress Party did” (111). He says Muslim community leaders such as Maulana Maudoodi vehemently opposed the formation of 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). Sarwar’s argument was that, 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 presents the plight of Muslims community and says that “Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism” (108).

Shashi Tharoor through the character Lakshman, an Oscar Wilde quoting district administrator presents a person who believes in the secular foundations of the country. Throughout the narration he maintains the balance and worries of the futility of religious cause. He presents the summary of the whole episode 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). Gurinder Singh’s, a Sikh Cop and the Superintendent of the District police only aim is to control the riots no matter what the cost would be. He represents the honest officers of the country who try to render their services by all the means of virtue.

The book also, focuses one of the saddest episodes of the assassination of former Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and the aftermath of Sikhs massacre in Delhi and its surroundings. Gurinder Singh narrates the history and the story of Khalistan, the chaos created and resulted into the assassination of then Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and its repulsions on the Sikh community, especially in the national capital Delhi and its surroundings to Randy Diggs on 14 October 1989. He calls the series of events related to Khalistan movement constitutes the biggest story of the decade-80s. He opines 1984 was the most awful year even comparing with 1947 partition or 1962 Chinese arrival near to Delhi.

On the day of Indira Gandhi’s assassination by her Sikh body guards, the reprisal started on the same day. The Sikh community was targeted. “There was an orgy of slaughter, of arson, of looting. Sikh neighbourhoods were destroyed, families butchered, homes torched. Some of the mobs had lists of addresses showing which homes and business were owned by Sikhs’ (P.194). All of them were targeted.

Then Gurinder narrates the pathetic tale 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 of Navjyoth, who dreamt to

be a future Sunil Gavaskar, the opening batsman for Indian cricket team. A rude mob surrounded the car, and immediately Gurinder's brother-in law locked the car from inside by reassuring his son. The mob spilled petrol on the car and set it ablaze. The two in the car asphyxiated, burned choking to death (195). It took the Government to control the riots, three days. Meanwhile hundreds of Sikhs lost their lives, thousands lost everything they possessed.

Riot is the tool for re-examining accepted history in order to update it with new, fresh, accurate and impartial material. Tharoor re-examines the past with impartiality, using history as his beginning point. History is not a single entity. There are histories that are disjointed and inconsistent. Historians can no longer claim to be neutral and detached in their research. It is impossible to escape the historical circumstance. The past is not something that confronts us as if it were a tangible object, but rather something that is built from previously written material of various types. History is usually about telling a story about the past while intertextually incorporating other texts. Politics, power, authority and subversion are more important aspects than everything else in history. The value of the novel lies in the way the writer presents a very impartial picture of the views of the different communities, what really emerges is the conflict of communities rather than the conflict of religions.

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