



Shashi Tharoor's Riot: the Mirror of Indian Society

DR. BHAVESH D. PARMAR

Assistant Professor (English) Dr. Subhash Technical Campus, Khamdhrol Road, Junagadh

Abstract:

The present paper is an attempt to throw a light on Shashi Tharoor's Riot as the mirror of Indian society. The present research paper aims to cover aspects of Indian society such as history, politics, religion and culture. Tharoor is among one of the prolific writers, who has brought popularity to post modern Indian English literature. In Riot, Tharoor tries to find some of the most contemporary issues on a small canvas to probe everyday life of Indian people. There are some of the people who feel a shame to be called an Indian and having dislike against Indian culture and values. Tharoor has taken too much trouble for portraying our situations and the history of unbalance existing between two religions as well as a love story of cross cultural beings. It raises some of the issues concerned with time, place and culture of India through Riot.

Keywords: Mirror, Indian society, History, Culture, Religion, Cross culture relationship

1. Introduction

Indian Society has been a leading medium of writing in modern Indian English literature. There are a few writers such as Khushwant Singh, V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Sheth, Arundhati Roy and Shashi Tharoor, who have attempted the aspects of Indian society in a real sense. In this paper, an attempt has been made to probe Shashi Tharoor's Riot in the perspective of Indian society. Tharoor himself points out in one of his interviews, "I have been extraordinary, emotionally and intellectually fascinated by the idea of India, by the forces that have shaped and made India and by the forces that have sometimes threatened to unmake it."¹

2. Tharoor's Riot as the Mirror of Indian Society

Tharoor is extensively known as the eternally experimenting novelist. Riot consists an innovative narrative technique. By being a journalist, he applies journalistic reporting, diary writing and interviews to reflect reality from a multiple point of view that concerns his novel. By keeping abiding mystery of the novel in mind, the entire novel travels through the eyes and voices of various characters, flitting between news clippings, personal letters, notebooks and journals, scrapbook noting, private conversations and transcript interviews. In Riot, Tharoor appears to enjoy his life on double levels. One, he seems to be the quaint international civil servant maintaining the peace and dousing the flames in the world's flash points, on the other he appears to search the way out of pacifying communalism and violence plaguing Indian awareness to a great extent. Tharoor declares, "The themes that concern me in this novel, love and hate, cultural collision, in particular, in this case 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 as well, issues of unknowability of history.....and finally, perhaps the unknowability of truth."²

The main plot of the novel begins with the death of a twenty four year old American volunteer named Priscilla Hart who comes to India in a Women's Health Programme and has been murdered in the small town, Zalliagarh located in U.P during a communal riot as well as the sectarian violence in the wake of Babri Masjid agitation. In Riot, one of the embassy spokesmen suggests about the murder of

Priscilla, "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 wrong time."³

In Riot, there are many aspects which have been drawn very nicely by Tharoor in the perspective of Indian society of those days. One aspect that really keeps us glued to the book is the love affair between Priscilla-Lakshman, an intellectual IAS officer, but a married man who is torn between his love for Priscilla and his feelings of responsibility towards his family. Their relationship highlights contrasting features of two cultures Western and Eastern. They represent the attitude of two different cultures towards love, sex and marriage. Many elements brought Lakshman and Priscilla very closer but sex for discussion in a very bold way plays a vital role in bringing this civil servant closer to the foreigner researcher. When he asks her, "These guys (her past lovers) you went out with, did you sleep with them?"⁴(83) She replied in a natural way, "Lucky, I am 24....you didn't expect me to be a virgin, did you?"⁵(83) In contrast to that, his wife, Geeta was a pure virtuous Indian woman. Forget sex, She never kissed a boy. She even never held hands with one. She had a different attitude towards sex. She just took it as a routine chore where she didn't want to initiate. On the other hand, Priscilla enjoys every moment of it as sex is a great festivity and celebration for her. All these brought both of them together but Lakshman's social life wins over his personal and existential faces and decides to end his relationship with Priscilla as he has to look after the family, especially his daughter Rekha. Priscilla is always lost because of his double standards and feels that perhaps it's a part of Indian culture. Perhaps in America marriage is a bond between two lovers while in India, it's an arrangement between families.

Adding one of the more aspects of Indian society, Priscilla notes that women in India didn't enjoy a respectable position in the society. They are considered to be secondary and a plaything in the hands of their husbands, protectors and lord beings. She also focuses on the violence against women. One of the female characters named Sundari, a married sister of Kadambari, a helper of Priscilla Hart suffers a lot due to her husband & her mother in law. In addition to that, Indian society is superstitious. We are somewhat superstitious. A typical Hindu believes in astrology, stars and myths etc. Geeta, Lakshman's wife is the best example of it. When she comes to know that her husband wanted to go with Priscilla to U.S.A., she goes to Swamiji and prays, undergoes fasts and asks for blessings from divine world to save her relationship.

Focusing on the characters of the novel, Ram Chandra Gupta is a typical Hindu Indian leader. Reminding the incident when Priscilla's parents meets him, he firmly opines, "In Ayodhya, there are many temples of Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore. It is the Ram Janam Bhoomi, the birth place of Lord Rama, a fit site for a grand temple..."⁶(52) He added that in past days, a grand temple stood there. People came to worship Ram there. But a Muslim king, the Mughal Emporer Babar knocked it down and in its place he built a big mosque. Naturally Hindu community was much hurt by this. He asks very strongly, "Would Muslims be happy if any Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca?"⁷(53)

On the other hand, a Muslim scholar man, Mohmmad Sarwar who is a professor of History at Delhi University, attempts to defend the minority psyche of Muslims. He shouts against "composite culture" or "Composite Religiosity". He argues that a number of Muslim saints are worshiped in India by Hindus such as Nizammudin Auliya, Moinjddin Chisti, Khwaja Khirz etc... so he feels that still Hindus have grudges against Muslims. There are prejudices in this country. The Hindutva brigade is trying to invent a new past for the nation. Indians want to teach Muslims a lesson though they haven't learned many lessons from themselves. He often thinks of Mohmmad Iqbal, the great Urdu poet,"Tumhari tahzeeb khud apne khanjar se khudkhushi karegi". He believes that our civilization will commit suicide out of its own complexity. He who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to

destruction. He points out that Muslims are part of indivisible unity that is Indian nationality, without them, the splendid structure of India is incomplete.

One of the more characters, Gurinder Singh, the figure of the police chief, tough, hard drinking, foul mouthed yet a dedicated and honest public servant police man whose aim is to control the riots no matter what the cost would be. A police man who had once dreamt of being a modern agriculturist, he had been on the verge of quitting Government service after his nephew's death, but had been persuaded against such a move by his father, who had asked him to continue in service so that he could contribute to the prevention of communal violence. It is Gurinder who tries to persuade Lakshman not to break up his family, a move which would have destroyed his career, his reputation and peace of his mind. He also protects Lakshman from public disgrace by secreting Priscilla's scrapbook after her murder and handing it over to Lakshman. He has been a true Indian friend indeed.

Making history as its base, Tharoor remeets the past with objectivity and irony and transforms it in to historiographical meta-fiction which problematizes history by presenting historical incidents and characters. Actually Riot is based on the real incident of a riot which happened Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. The actual incidents are related to coca cola controversy in India and the conflicts of Ram Janam Bhoomi and Babri Masjid. Riot leaves a mark on the emergence of a new perspective in its clear diversion from being a reflection of social reality.

3. Conclusion

To summarize, it can be said that Tharoor tries to analyze some of the most living issues of our daily life on a small canvas. It's a dedication to all those people who feel shame to be an Indian and complain against Indian social and cultural values. Perhaps Tharoor has taken too much trouble in portraying two religions and a love story of cross-cultural beings. It raises many questions but it is up to the reader to find the answers because all the raised questions concern each one of us. Tharoor's voice echoes in his own words, "I have grown up here (India). My intellect, my values have been shaped and formed by the experience of growing up in India. So India matters very much to me and I want in turn to matter to India and the way I can do is through my writings."⁸(68)

References

1. Tharoor, Shashi. "Beyond Boundries" The Indian express. July 22, 2005. p.11.
2. _____. Interview with Juhi Parikh. "You can't feel the country's pulse." May, 2004.
3. _____. Riot. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Publication,2001.p.1.
4. _____. Riot. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Publication,2001.p.83.
5. _____. Riot. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Publication,2001.p.83.
6. _____. Riot. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Publication,2001.p.52.
7. _____. Riot. New Delhi: Viking-Penguin Publication,2001.p.53.
8. Patil, Geeta. The heart belongs to India, Shashi Tharoor. His vision and art. New Delhi: Creative Books,2007.print.p.68.