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Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*: A Postmodern Study

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Abstract

Postmodernism is an extension to the modernism. It serves as a reaction to the supposed stylistic and ideological limitations of modernist literature andit is characterized by fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humour and authorial self-reference. Postmodern authors are likely to reject outright meanings in their novels, stories and poems, and instead, highlight and rejoice the prospect of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning, within a single literary work. Shahi Tharoor is one of the makers of new pattern in writing novels with post-modern thoughts and emotions in India. His *Riot*: *A Novel* (2001) is an influential work that employs the postmodernist perspectives in the form and content. The fundamental features of postmodernist fiction such as experimentation with the formal and thematic content of the novel, self-reflexivity, conscious handling of narrative, fragmentation, discontinuity, subversion of conventional modes of narration, multiple viewpoints, intertextuality, metafiction, mixing of the genres are all present in this novel. The present paper attempts to analyze *Riot: A Novel* in the light of postmodern perspectives.

Keywords: Postmodernism, literature, *Riot*, experimentation, revolt, self-reflexivity, fragmentation, multiple viewpoints, intertextuality, metafiction, mixing of the genres.

"Postmodern literature is literature characterized by reliance on narrative techniques such as fragmentation, paradox, and the unreliable narrator; and often is (though not exclusively) defined as a style or a trend which emerged in the post–World War II era. Postmodern works are seen as a response against Enlightenment thinking and Modernist approaches to literature." (Wikipedia) The conspicuous transformation in the novels published after the First World War, is called, modernism and the literature produced in the late 20th century, especially after the Second World War, is considered postmodern literature. The term postmodern literature is used to explaindefinite characteristics of post–World War II literature and a reaction against Enlightenment ideas embedded in Modernist literature.

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Postmodernism is considered to be an extension of modernism, a revolt against authority and established norms. Postmodern literature serves as a reaction to the supposed stylistic and ideological limitations of modernist literature. It is characterized by fragmentation, paradox, unreliable narrators, often unrealistic and downright impossible plots, games, parody, paranoia, dark humor and authorial self-reference. Postmodern authors are likely to reject outright meanings in their novels, stories and poems, and instead, highlight and rejoice the prospect of multiple meanings, or a complete lack of meaning, within a single literary work. Postmodern philosophy asserts that knowledge and facts are always relative to particular situations and that it's both pointless and impractical to endeavor to establish any specific meaning to any idea, theory or event. Postmodern philosophy is inclined to reject the possibility of grand narratives and, instead, claims that all belief systems and ideologies are developed for the purpose of dominating others and maintaining particular political and social systems.

The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 is considered to be the turning point in the history of Indian English novel writing and the literature after that underwent a radical change in form and content. The novelists started adopting the postmodern perspectives in their novels. Vikaram Seth, Shashi Tharoor, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Ruth Prawar Jhabwala and Amitav Ghosh are the other makers of new pattern in writing novels with post-modern thoughts and emotions in India. They question the function of history and mythology in determining the political, cultural and ideological dimensions of the nation and its subjects. They challenge and streamline the processes of history and mythmaking in their efforts to define the complex, fragmented and pluralistic nature of collective as well as individual identity in postmodern time and space.

Shashi Tharoor is certainly one of the noteworthy novelists in Indian writing in English whose unconventional narrative modes, pluralistic approach and experimental use of the myth and history in fiction, largely characterize the postmodern perspectives in life and literature. His *Riot*: *A Novel* (2001) is an influential work that employs the postmodernist perspectives in the form and content. The fundamental features of postmodernist fiction such as experimentation with the formal and thematic content of the novel, self-reflexivity, conscious handling of narrative, fragmentation, discontinuity, subversion of conventional modes of narration, multiple viewpoints, intertextuality, metafiction, mixing of the genres are all present in this novel. The novel takes communal riot in 1989 following the Babri Masjid–Ram Janmabhoomi agitation which results in the death of an evidently innocent young American student as its central theme. It addresses an extensive range of controversial concerns like religious fundamentalism, political corruption, east-west encounter, multiculturalism, bias based on caste, race or gender which deeply problematize the predicament of a so called free, secular and democratic country. It is a story of angry outburst of religious hatred that roused during the Babri Masjid and Ram Janmabhoomi issue and of love and passion between two persons of differing cultures. The novelistic matrix, thus, includes the problematization of race, culture, gender, class as well as the issue of

religious conflicts and ideological clash. Besides, the way Tharoor surpasses the generic boundaries through unconventional plot and multivaocal narrative gives it a postmodern touch. The novel disregards all sorts of prevailing or authoritative stance in terms of form. Let's examine elaborately the *Riot: A Novel* in the light of postmodernism.

Multiplicity of Truths

One of the conspicuous traits of postmodern literature is the flaunting of multiplicity of truths. The idea that the truth is one is extinct. There can be more than one truth. Truth can be relative. In *Riot* Shashi Tharoor has challenged the Indian Government's official motto: "Satyameva Jayate", "Truth Alone Triumphs" when Lakshaman says, "But sometimes I'm tempted to ask, whose truth? There is not always an easy answer." (236) It is wrong to say that truth always triumphs. We can say that the one who triumphs gets an opportunity to prove his truth and the one who loses doesn't. India is a country with diverse colors. There are five major sources of divisions in India – language, region, caste, class and religion. Now with so much of divisions, differences, variety and multiplicity of truth in India is inevitable.

Of the five sources of division mentioned above, the last one i.e. religion is the most sensitive one. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* portrays multi-perspective truths about the Hindu-Muslim communal tension. Tharoor, in his fiction uses the rapid acceleration of Hindu fundamentalism that preceded the demolition of the Babri Masjid in 1992 as the main framework. The central theme of the novel is the communal riot that took place in highly charged communal atmosphere in a fictional north Indian town of Zalilgarh. It examines the ideological concerns involved in this issue. He presents both the Hindu perspective which supports the repossession of the Ram Janmabhoomi from the Muslims, and the Muslim edition of the whole confrontation. The Hindu perspective is presented through the views given by Ram Charan das when he says:

> …. Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya many thousands of years ago, in the treta-yuga period of our Hindu calendar… In Ayodhya there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore. It is the Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Ram. A fit site for a grand temple you might think. But if you go to Ayodhya, you will see no Ram Janmbhoomi temple there. In olden days a great temple stood there. Amagnificent temple. There are legends about how big it was, how glorious. Pilgrims from all over India would come to worship Ram there. But a Muslim king, a 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. Can you imagine! A mosque on our holiest site… Naturally our community was very much hurt by this… But what could we do? For hundreds of years we suffered under the Muslim yoke. Then the British came and things were no better. We thought then that after independence, everything would change. Most of the Muslims in Ayodhya left to go to Pakistan. The mosque was no longer much needed as a mosque. Then, a miracle occurred.

> Some devotees found that an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of the mosque. It was a clear sign from God. His temple has to be rebuilt on that sacred spot. (53-54)

Hindu's perspective towards Muslims and their hatred towards Muslims are again encapsulated in below given words of Ram Charan Das:

> Now these Muslims have already divided our country once, to create their accursed Pakistan on the sacred soil of our civilization. Some of greatest sites of Hindu civilization–the ancient cities of Harappa and Mohenjo Daro, the world's oldest university at Takshshila, even the river Indus from which India gets its name in your language –are all now in foreign country. It galls me to say this. But we have swallowed our pride and accepted this vile partition. But is this enough for them? Oh no! Muslims want more! And we had Muslim-loving rulers, like that brown Englishman Jawaharlal Nehru who was our first prime minister, to give it to them. Muslim men want four wives., Whom they can divorce by chanting a phrase three times–so Nehru gives them the right to follow their own Personal law instead of being subject to the civil code of the rest of the country. Muslims want to go abroad to worship at their Mecca, so the government pays for the ships and planes to take them there every year and the hotels and lodges for them to stay in on the way. I ask you, why should my tax money go to helping Muslims get closer to their foreign god? (55)

Besides, Tharoor has meticulously mentioned reasons for Hindu's grudge for Muslim community by citing the issues of Kashmir, the case of Shah Banu, the support Muslims get from secularist government etc. in detail through Ram Charan Das's conversation with Diggs.

The insecurities, the non-belongingness to the country and the ordeals of Indian Muslims are echoed in the arguments of Professor Mohammed Sarwar. He is the representative of those Indian Muslims who feel that their birth right as an Indian citizen has been sold by Jinnah for the bowl of soup. Some of Indian Muslims like Prof. Sarwar think that their birth right as an Indian cannot be sold so easily, but it is preciously that sense of loss that drives many of them to rage and sorrow –the feeling that, since the country was divided in their name, they are somehow less entitled to their due in what remains of it. They feel that the part of their birthright has indeed been given away. It leads to some Muslims into a sort of as Tharoor mentions "self-inflicted second class citizenship" (110) Tharoor has shown the Muslim's suffering when Prof. Sarwar says, "Pakistani will never understand the depth of the disservice Jinnah did us, Indian Muslim as a whole, when he made some of us into non-Indians. There are so many Indians who –out of ignorance as well as prejudice –think of us as somebody different from them, somehow foreign." (111) Arguing against Hindu's charges of Shah Banu case and Muslim men's right to have four wives, Sarwar says, "The Rajiv Gandhi government's action on Shah Banu was pure political opportunism; it was a sellout to Muslim conservatives, but a betrayal of Muslim women and Muslim

reformers."(114) Addressing the charge, the Hindus lay on Muslims, regarding their intension of increasing the population overtaking Hindus by having four wives, he says, "If Muslims have four wives –and not many do –how do that increase the number of reproductive Muslim wombs, which still remains four whether by one husband or many?" (114) Tharoor has faithfully captured the minority complex Hindu chauvinists want to impose on Indian Muslims. Sarwar has rationalized the truth of minorityhood when he says, "What makes me a minority? Is it a mathematical concept? Well, mathematically, Muslims were always a minority in India, before partition, even in the mediaeval Muslim period I spent my life researching and teaching. But when Mughals ruled on the thrones of Delhi, were Muslims a "minority" then? Mathematically no doubt, but no Indian Muslim thought of himself as a minority… Minorityhood is state of mind." (114-115)

The Muslim's truth about the issue of Ram Janmabhoomi is represented by the historian, Professor Sarwar. He argues:

> Isn't it amazing how these Hindu chauvinist types claim the history on their side? People like me spend years trying to establish the veracity of an event, a date, an inscription, but the likes of Ram Charan Gupta have not the slightest doubt that their Lord Rama was born at the Ram Janmabhoomi, and what's more, at the precise spot they call the Ram Janmasthan –not ten yards away, not ten feet away, but right there. Their own beliefs are that Rama flourished in the treta-yuga of Hindu tradition, which means that their historical exactitude goes back, oh, about a million years. What is a mere historian like me to do in the face of such breathtaking knowledge? (180)

As Rama is the hero of the great epic Ramayana, Muslims tend to believe that there cannot be any certitude whether Rama was born at all or simply emerged from the creative mind of Valmiki.

The way Hindu secularists look at the issue of the Hindu-Muslim communal divide in India is another aspect of the truth. Lakshaman is the one of such secularists who feels ashamed of the Hindu activists' intention of assaulting Muslims. The rationalist voice of Hindu secularist is heard when hesays, "why should today's Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done four hundred and fifty years ago." (145) If the Muslims in 16th century acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, Hindus need not act the same way in 20th century. By doing so, Hindus hurt the feelings of today's Muslims and provoke their rage and violence. This in turns damages the image of Hindu across the world.

Tharoor tries to analyze the concept of secularism in which Hindus and Muslims are proud of being Hindus and Muslims respectively but with tolerance and respect for each other and united through their common identity as Indians. Lakshaman condemns the activities of Hindu fundamentalists of assaulting the Muslims by defining Hinduism not as a religion but a way of life. He has rightly expressed how Hinduism accepts the multiplicity of truths and embraces all the faith systems. He says, "Hinduism embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism

and from faith in reincarnation to the belief in the caste system. But none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu: there are none." (143) Multiplicity of truth accepted by the Hinduism is seen by the fact that it gives one the right to reject it. One can be atheist and still can be a Hindu. Further, Lakshaman says:

> Above all, as a Hindu I belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to the only true religion. I find it immensely congenial to be able to able to face my fellow human beings of other faiths without being burdened by the conviction that I am embarked upon a "true path" that they have missed… Hinduism, however, asserts that all ways of belief are equally valid, and Hindus readily venerate the saints, and the sacred objects of other faiths. There is no such thing as a Hindu heresy. (144)

Thus, different layers of truth about the Hindu-Muslim communal divide are discussed through the juxtaposition of Ram Charan Gupta, Prof. Mohammed Sarwar and Lakshaman. Lakshaman having the balanced view regarding the issue, reaming two have valid agreements against the other. Thus, Tharoor has presented truths of two communities trying to establish and reinforce their identities.

Uncertainty of the Truth

If postmodern literature is inclined towards the multiplicity of truth, the uncertainty of truth is the obvious phenomena. If the truth is more than one, there cannot be any certain truth. *Riot* begins with the newspaper report of *The New York Journal* which reads, "A rioting mob attacked and killed an American woman in a town east of New Delhi yesterday, a few days before she was to return home, the U.S. embassy announced." (2) The report triggers to range of political, cultural, and historical interpretation and possibilities. It raises a chain of questions. Who killed Priscilla Hart? Why was an American Christian killed in the communal riot of Hindu and Muslim? What was she doing in the small, sensitive and infamous town of India during riot? Was she killed just by an accident? Or, was she killed precisely because of her American identity? The mysterious death of Pricilla during communal riot in a fictional Indian village of Zalilgarh is the pivot around which Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* imposes a range of viewpoints about the so called facts of history. History is not a web woven with innocent hands. History is just someone's version of the facts. In the words of Nishat Haider, "History is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as intertexts. History is not a matter of dates and great events but of politics, ideology, power, authority and subversion" (247). If there is the interplay of truth and imagination, reality and fiction in history, the novelistic representation of any historical event is bound to be a muddle of contradictory standpoints. The apparent pursuit in the novel is to find out the conditions which resulted into the cruel killing of Priscilla Hart. Though the story begins with some probable questions and moves further with the attempts to fathom the truth behind the unexplained murder of Pricilla, it ends with the more complexities and leaving readers more confused with contradictory accounts of bunch of characters. The story, unlike murder mystery stories, does not please reader's

desire for certainty but disappoints their longing for final resolution. Tharoor hides the identity of the murderer and allows the multiple possibilities. It could have been Makhan Singh, or Ali, or the Swami's goondas, or any other anonymous participant in the riot. By shrouding the identity of the murder, Tharoor conveys that the exact knowledge is rather irrelevant and that the only thing that matters is that she got killed. Perhaps he wants to accentuate the inaccessibility of truth. The novel ends with uncertain conclusion which may sound inconclusive, "that she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time." (267)

The Unconventional Narrative

Postmodernism tends to use unconventional narrative style, embraces the idea of fragmentation and uses it to create playful texts that reflect and explore the chaos of the world. The present novel adroitly begins at the end, with a newspaper report of the murder of Priscilla Hart, who was in India as part of her fieldwork for her doctoral research. But the novel does not just outlines the incidents of her life in a linear pattern. Rather, it is avowedly polyphonic and multivocal. "Unlike the prevalent customary literary style of a single narrative voice dominating the novel, it is aligned to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and consists of differing utterances." (Parween 56-60) The narrative develops through different voices of fundamentalists and secularists, Westerners and Indians, men and women. "Its polyphony provides space to representatives of different groups from the diehard fanatic Ram Charan to the tolerant pacifist Laxman or Sarwar, form the American Priscilla and Randy Diggs to the native Fatima bi and Geetha." (Parween 56-60)

On a structural level, *Riot* is divided into seventy eight segments of changing sizes. The segments are not traditional chapters but are the spoof columns, letters, diaries, excerpts from notebooks, telegrams, scrapbooks, greeting cards, interview transcripts, and the style varies from the funny Indian English of Shankar Das to the literary English by Laxaman, Pricilla and Prof. Sarwar with a wild wealth of abusive words and weird forms of profanities by the IPS Gurinadar and other politicians. The novel turns into a jumble of varied genres with the poems written by Lakshman and Priscilla, and the long discourses on history and politics by Ram Charan Gupta and Prof. Mohammed Sarwar. The novel is the amalgamation of tragedy and romantic saga, solemn criticism and witty anecdote, a fantasy world and dreadful realism; formal literary language, a naive child's wavering English and informal talks caught up in slangs and foul language. There is a blend of various genres like verse and prose, myth, romance and mystery, poem and epistle, historical writing, political critique and literature.

While both modernism and postmodernism literature break from the realism and idealism and explore fragmentariness in narrative and character-construction, what makes them different is the fact that while Modernist literature sees fragmentation as an existential crisis, or Freudian internal conflict, a problem that must be solved, and the artist is often cited as the one to solve it, Postmodernists, on the other hand, often demonstrate that this chaos is insurmountable; the artist is impotent, and the only

recourse against chaos is to play within the chaos. The playfulness of the form becomes central in the text. Solution remains secondary. *Riot* starts with a newspaper report describing the murder of an American girl amidst communal riots. However, Tharoor doesn't identify the murderer signifying that in riot no one is responsible or everyone is responsible. Riot is a collective crime. However, Tharoor doesn't give any solution to the problem of the communal hatred. The novel starts with murder but ends leaving readers clueless with the U. S. embassy spokesman arriving at the naïve conclusion which rather sounds inconclusive "that she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time." (267) However, the novel ends with Lakshman's question whether there is such a thing as the wrong place, or the wrong time. He says, "We are where we are at the only time we have. Perhaps it's where we're meant to be". (267) This certainly signifies the inevitability of chaos. The novel explains the issue of Hindu-Muslim communal rift and agitation from multiple perspectives but by leaving the readers dazed, he signifies the impossibility of solution to the chaos. The fragmentariness and disorder of the form is the way Tharoor has expressed the insurmountable chaos and disorder.

The Ploy of Pastiche

Pastiche is a post-modern ploy that uses many sources and comes up with a new piece of literature. It is equivalent to collage in photography. It is not about creating something from scratch but drawing on what already exists.

As admitted by Tharoor himself, the origin of *Riot* can be traced back to two historical events – the first being the boiling Hindu-Muslim restlessness of 1980s resulting in the bloodshed and brutality regarding the disputed Babri Masjid at Ayodhya, areport of which he received from his friend in the form of a detailed description about a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, and the second being a report of the death of an American woman in a racial riot in South Africa. Tharoor combines both these events with commendable luminosity and agility crafting the story of his text *Riot*. This amalgamation of the two historical events is example of the use of pastiche.

Metafiction

One of the techniques abundantly found in postmodern novels is the technique of metafiction. The word 'metafiction' indicates the kind of text that highlights its status as a text. The technique of Metafiction keeps the readers completely aware of the fact that it is fiction—some literature may try to be naturalistic or realistic, but postmodernism doesn't conceal what it is. In fact, it flaunts it. Rather than hiding its structure and techniques, metafiction lays its cards on the table. In other words, postmodern texts are self-referential. There are many different ways in which authors can create this effect—story-within-a-story, making obvious references to storytelling conventions—but what they have in common is that they draw attention to the methods of writing and reading.

Tharoor has discussed the theory of his novel in one of the chapters of the book entitled 'From Lakshman's journal: June 2, 1989' (135-7) In this chapter, Tharoor

talks about the art of writing a novel. Lakshman, the aspiring poet and writer, is the fictional surrogate of the author here. He writes:

> "I'd like to write a novel," I tell her, "that doesn't read like a novel. Novels are too easy – they tell a story, in a linear narrative, from start to finish. They've done that for decades. Centuries, perhaps. I'd do it differently."
>
> She raises herself on an elbow. "You mean, write an epic?"
>
> "No," I reply shortly, "someone's done that already. I've read about this chap who's just reinvented the Mahabharata as a twentieth-century story – epic style, oral tradition, narrative digressions, the lot. No, what I mean is, why can't I write a novel that reads like – like an encyclopedia?"
>
> "An encyclopedia?" She sounds dubious.
>
> "Well, a short one. What I mean is, something in which you can turn to any page and read. You pick up chapter 23, and you get one thread of the plot. Then you go forwards to chapter 37, or backwards to 16, and you get another thread. And they're all interconnected, but you see the interconnections differently depending on the order in which you read them. It's like each bit of reading adds to the sum total of the reader's knowledge, just like an encyclopedia. But to each new bit of reading he brings the knowledge he's acquired up to that point – so that each chapter means more, or less, depending on how much he's learned already." (135-6)

Intertextuality

The poet John Donne once wrote that "no man is an island," and for postmodernists, no text is an island. Postmodernism is all about the connections between texts, including the various ways in which one text references another or many others.For postmodernists, it is clear that no text exists in isolation and that works of literature can only be created using stuff that already exists.

In its intertextuality the *Riot* employs real historical and political events of the issues of Ram Janmabhoomi and the Babri Masjid for its central theme of communal riots in India in the late 20th century. The novel brings into play the references of principal mythologies and epics as the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* and thoughts of real personages as intertexts. The novel is loaded with the quotations of Oscar Wilde used by Lakshaman very now and then. He also makes references of the ancient Sanskrit text of *Natyashastra*. The references of Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra* by Gurinder, Freud by Lakshaman and Lawrence of Arabia by Priscilla are few of the examples of intertextuality employed in the novel.

Conclusion

To conclude, with its pluralistic approach, multiplicity of voices, heterogeneity of forms, inclusion of variety of genres, unconventional narrative, lack of narrative closure, fragmentation, problematization of the past, concern with politics and history with an

ingrained futuristic bent, self-referentiality, intertextuality and acknowledgement of plural truths, the novel can be aptlydescribed as a postmodern fiction.

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