



Research Paper

Theme of Politics and History in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*: A Study.

Narendra Singh (Research Scholar)

Dr. Suta Kumari (Supervisor)

Abstract:

If one talks about created works of the historical fiction, most of the writers of this genre have included the depiction of politics and history in their works. They have successfully exposed the police brutality, crime, partition of countries, riots, racial clashes, planned murders, elections, various operations, epidemics etc. All these themes have been considered in or taken as the most selected topics for writing a historical fiction. Shashi Tharoor has also expressed his concern on politics and history in his novel *Riot*.

Shashi Tharoor's Riot is a powerful novel set in and around a riot in India in 1989. In the backdrop of riot, he focuses on love, hate, political collision, religious fanaticism, history and the impossibility of knowing the truth. He expresses lays bare the deteriorating political conditions in the country. Through an intellectual challenge and emotional involvement of the readers, he delineates the reality of politics which becomes responsible for hostility between Hindus and Muslims.

Shashi Tharoor wants to bring home the point that Muslims are part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality; without them India is incomplete. They are the essential element and have their dole of share in the making of India. Thus the novel becomes a fictional tour-de-force about the politics and history in India.

Key Words: *Mystery, Political Collision, Palpable, tour de force.*

Received 14 Apr, 2022; Revised 28 Apr, 2022; Accepted 30 Apr, 2022 © The author(s) 2022.

Published with open access at www.questjournals.org

Shashi Tharoor is one of the most celebrated authors in Indian English. He is one of the most significant literary voices to emerge from India in recent decades. He is an Indian politician and an acclaimed writer who has been twice elected Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. He was previously Minister of State in the Government of India for External Affairs (2009–2010) and Human Resource Development (2012–2014). Tharoor is also a well-known award-winning prolific writer, having authored fifteen bestselling works of fiction and non-fiction since 1981, all of which are centred on India and its history, culture, film, politics, society, foreign policy, and more. He is also the author of hundreds of columns and articles in publications such as the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *TIME*, *Newsweek*, and *The Times of India*. He had been a contributing editor for *Newsweek International* for two years. From 2010 to 2012, he wrote a column in *The Asian Age/Deccan Chronicle* and, for most of 2012, until his appointment as Minister, a column in *Mail Today*. He also writes an internationally syndicated monthly column for *Project Syndicate*. He has also written regular columns for *The Indian Express* (1991–93 and 1996–2001), *The Hindu* (2001–2008), and *The Times of India* (2007–2009). Tharoor is a globally recognised speaker too, on India's economics and politics, as well as on freedom of the press, human rights, Indian culture, and international affairs.

In fact, Shashi Tharoor has emerged as a formidable writer on the world literary scene. He writes about politics and history in his works and deals with the Indian politics and history while discussing the political background of the country in them. In his fiction he offers commentary on the historical situations and raises a national debate. He throws light on the diverse facets of Indian political developments in India. He is very sensitive towards the various anxieties felt by the Indian people and therefore depicts them by responding to the existing threats to the country. In fact, he writes for India which matters to him more than anything. In an interview given to *The Indian Express*, Shashi Tharoor remarks:

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. (Beyond Boundaries 11)

Since the beginning of the writing of Indian English literature, a number of works have been written on the themes of politics and history. In this respect, novel writing has come on the forefront and discussed politics and history exhaustively in it. In Indian English novel writing, there are a number of novelists who have faithfully discussed the politics of the country and portrayed the pictures of developments taking place in political corridors of the country. As we know our country is a land that has diversities of region, climate, race, culture etc., this diversity of India has provided opportunities and perfect grounds to the writers to pen down the political and historical events. Indian writers have written on Indian political and historical happenings a very large number of crispy stories. They even have used history creatively to the extent that history has been immortalized in their works. There is a long list of writers who have gained fame and appreciation of their historical works. A few names may be mentioned here such as Amitav Ghosh, Khushwant Singh, Chaman Nahal, Yasmin Khan, Sarat Kumar Ghosh, Salman Rushdie, Vikram Seth, Deepak Chopra, Ruchir Gupta, Rabindra Nath Tagore, Padma Vishwanathan, Rattan Kaul etc.: these are some writers who deserve to be mentioned here. And of course, Shashi Tharoor is one of those writers who have expressed their concern on the misuse or disuse of the political power and given it a wrong turn. Once Bill Ashcroft remarked:

“If there was ever a time when writers could refuge from politics in the world of imagination, then that time has long past”, says Bill Ashcroft, “The world is richer and yet more people are poorer than any time in history. Neither writing nor criticism can avoid the call to justice forced on the world by the mushrooming of neo-liberal political and economic power.” (Forward. Arundhati Roy: *Critical Perspectives* iv)

However, the credit of bringing political justice to the people goes to Shashi Tharoor who has made efforts to examine and discuss the themes of politics and history fearlessly. About his novel *Riot*, Uma Nair writes:

Riot skims the anguish of isolation and the social mores of Indian society bringing back once in a while the historic crutches of suspicion and divisiveness that we have been left with (Once Upon This Time Online. /books/riot/asianage)

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is a powerful novel set in and around a riot in India in 1989. In the backdrop of riot, he focuses on love, hate, political collision, religious fanaticism, history and the impossibility of knowing the truth. In the novel, Tharoor portrays the political history of India with reference to a specific city in a particular year. The Pioneer writes:

Shashi Tharoor is widely acknowledged as the eternally experimenting novelist. *Riot* too employ, an innovative narrative technique. In keeping with the abiding mystery of the novel, the entire novel travels through the eyes and voices of various characters, flitting between news clippings, personal letters, notebooks and journals, scrapbook notings, private conversations, and transcribed interviews, no omniscient narrator holding the reader's hand through the novel. (https://shashitharoor.in/review_details_fiction/25)

Shashi Tharoor describes the events as a journalist – use of diary, interviews, reporting etc. in this novel. Without caring for any retaliation from the politically powerful person, he goes on to attack the establishment – political and historical. In one of his interviews, he remarks:

Riot is a novel about the ownership of history, about love, hate, cultural collision religious, fanaticism and impossibility of knowing the truth. (Interview. <http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/riot/readings/22riot.html>)

In the novel *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor expresses his concern on the deteriorating political conditions in the country. He raises the question who has killed Priscilla Hart, who was is a highly motivated, idealistic American student. She has come to India as a volunteer in women's health programme but becomes a victim of communal frenzy. The novel is a vibrant work of fiction about the communal flare-up in northern India in the wake of Ram Janambhumi movement by Hindu fundamentalists in late 1980s and early 1990s. The novelist takes on a wide range of topics and examines the reasons of communal tension between Hindus and Muslims through the post-mortem of a fictional riot. He depicts the tension which is palpable with much insight and proposes a balanced critique of both Hindu nationalism and Muslim fundamentalism. He throws light on the role of the administration in controlling riots on one hand while on the other, he expresses his concern on the mystery of the murder of Priscilla Hart when the riot was rampant.

In the novel *Riot*, through an intellectual challenge and emotional involvement of the readers, Shashi Tharoor delineates the reality of political developments which become responsible for hostility between Hindus and Muslims. Thus the novel is a fictional tour-de-force about the ownership of history, cultural collision, religious fanaticism, and the impossibility of knowing the truth. Through the portrayal of characters belonging to both communities – Hindu and Muslim – Shashi Tharoor tries to find a way-out pacifying communalism and violence which have destroyed the unity and peace of mind of the people. Shagufta Parween writes:

In *Riot*, even Laxman, with his close affinity to Priscilla and intricate awareness of the power politics operating in the town is unable to even grasp at a vague hint, a fact that makes the grief of separation more painful and unbearable. The unfathomable mystery of the circumstances Priscilla's death and the identity of her murderer becomes only a minute reflection of the unknowability of the history of the nation. (Rethinking History: A Study of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* as a Postmodern Historiographic Metafiction 59)

The depiction of politics and history starts right from the opening of the plot of the novel when an American social worker Priscilla Hart is murdered during a riot on the issue of demolition of Mabri Masjid. Tharoor writes in the beginning of the novel:

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... 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." (Riot 1)

The detrimental effect of riots in India has been highlighted through the description of Priscilla Hart who loved Indian people and India:

She knew these people... she knew India. Not just the fancy restaurants in Delhi or the diplomatic circles and around the embassy. She lived in that little town, among Hindus, Muslim, everybody. Nobody would have had a reason to kill her. (Riot 2)

Shashi Tharoor, indeed, laments on the death of Priscilla Hart as she was like an angel for Indian people:

Priscilla was a gem, an angel, a person brought onto this earth to do good... She fell in love with India... It was her dream to go back, to do good for the people there... Priscilla wanted everyone to work together. She was determined to make a difference in the lives of the women of India. (Riot 2-3)

Thus, through the depiction of the murder of Priscilla Hart, Shashi Tharoor wants to bring home the point that these communal riots bring disaster and tragic waste. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is based on a real incident of riot that took place in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. Here, through the presentation of fictional characters, the novelist gets success in portraying the historical incidents and characters. Through the conversation among the characters such as Laxman, Ram Charan Gupta, Mohammad Sarwar etc, Shashi Tharoor presents the ideology which has been infused in them by the politicians of the contemporary times. In the backdrop of the conflict of Ram Janam Bhoomi and Babri Masjid, the novelist treats politics in relation to historical events.

After the murder of Priscilla Hart, her parents visit the city Zailgarh where they meet along with an American journalist Randy Diggs, the local Hindu fundamentalist leader Ram Charan Gupta to enquire about the political reason of the riot. Mr. Ram Charan Gupta is a staunch supporter of the construction of Ram Mandir at the place of Babri Masjid. He remarks:

Now 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 Janam Bhoomi, the birthplace of Lord Rama. A fit site for a grand temple, you might think. But if you go to Ayodhya, you will see no Ram Janmabhoomi temple there. In olden days a great temple stood there. A magnificent 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, the 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. (Riot 52)

Thus, this long description highlights the fact that Mr. Ram Charan Gupta is in favour of the demolition of Babri Masjid and that a very huge Ramjanmabhoomi temple should be constructed over there. He thinks that the praying of Muslims at the place of Lord Rama's birth is not acceptable at all:

A mosque on Hindu's holiest site! Muslims praying to Mecca on the very spot where our divine Lord Ram was born... Would Muslims be happy if some Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca. (Riot 52-53).

He hates Muslims for their evils and disloyalty:

But these Muslims are evil people... They 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. (R 54).

Ram Charan Gupta goes on to quote the words of one Sadhvi Rithmbhara, a famous preacher of a progressive modern faith. The Sadhvi says:

Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it up into little pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away. That is what we have to do... that is what the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Barjrang Dal, the Shiv Sena, the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh and all the associated organizations of our political family, the Sangh Parivar, will do one day. And the whole world should be grateful, because these Muslims are evil people... Muslims are fanatics and terrorists; they only understand the language of force... Wherever these Muslims are, they fight with others. Violence against non-Muslims is in their blood. (R 57).

To counter the Hindutva ideology of Ram Charan Gupta, Shashi Tharoor presents a Muslim scholar Mohammed Sarwar who is a professor in the Department of History of Delhi University. He feels pride in the tenets of Islam as well as in being an Indian. Through his character, Shashi Tharoor hopes to bring home the point that Muslims have also contributed in the progress of the country. Professor Mohammed Sarwar remarks:

I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality... I am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim. It was India's historic destiny that my human races and culture and religions should flow to her, and that many a caravan should rest here...one of the last of these caravans was that of the followers of Islam. They came here and settled for good. We brought our treasures with us, and India too was full of the riches of her own precious heritage. We gave her what she needed most, the most precious of gifts from Islam's treasury, the message of human equality...Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism. (Riot 108)

As far as the partition of the country and its division into two – India and Pakistan - is concerned, Shashi Tharoor, through the words of Professor Mohammed Sarwar, states that partition was the result of the wrong decisions of bad Muslims:

Partition was less a triumph for Indian Muslims than an abdication. In fact, most of the country's Islamic leaders, and especially those whom you might think of today as "fundamentalists" (people like Maulana Maudoodi, who was to spend years in Pakistani jails), were bitterly opposed to the movement for Pakistan. They felt that Islam should prevail over the world at large and certainly over India as a whole, and they thought it treasonous – both to India and to Islam itself – advocate that the religion be territorially circumscribed as Jinnah and the Muslim Leaguers did. Pakistan was created by "bad" Muslims, secular Muslims, not by the "good" Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to speak. (R 019)

Sarwar emphasizes on the fact that there were many Indian Muslims who were openly anti-Pakistan as compared to many Hindus. The novelist wants to say that, due to the partition, Indian Muslims are the losers as they have to bear charges of partitioning the country while it was a decision of defection by Jinnah and other Leaguers. He gives the example of two Muslim leaders in the following words:

Mohammed Currim Chagla, who was India's foreign minister during the 1965 war with Pakistan, made a speech in Parliament during the Bangladesh war of 1971 in which he said that "Pakistan was conceived in sin and is dying in violence." Do you know M.J. Akbar, the editor of the Telegraph? India's brightest young journalist, a real media star, and a Muslim. Well, he famously denounced Jinnah as having "sold the birthright of the Indian Muslim for a bowl of soup." (R 109)

Sarwar, rather Shashi Tharoor is pained at the violence in the name of the construction of Lord Ram Temple. He, quite puzzlingly asks the question:

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 Janmabhoomi 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? (R 110)

When once, during the days of college, Sarwar is blamed by one of the fellow students for partitioning the country, he declares:

If I h'd partitioned the country, I wouldn't be here. I'd be in Pakistan...If you mean I'm a Muslim, I plead guilty to the charge of being Muslim. But to no other charge. Muslims didn't partition the country – the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did. There are more Muslims in India than in Pakistan. This is where we belong. (R 111)

Mohammed Sarwar defends Muslims:

Yes, there's prejudice in this country... Indian Muslims suffer disadvantages, even discrimination, in a hundred ways that I may never personally experience. (R 112)

Thus, Shashi Tharoor, through the words of Mohammed Sarwar, highlights the facts that there is a wave of prejudices against Muslims in India by those who are fundamentalists. The Hindutva lobby in an attempt of writing a new past for India, in which historical wrongs are being concocted. Mohammed Sarwar says to V. Lakshman:

The whole point is that historians like myself, who haven't sold our souls to either side in this wretched ongoing communal argument, have a duty to dig into the myths that divide and unite our people. The Hindutva brigade is busy trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs they want to right, dredging up "evidence" of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory. (R 67)

This is also being done by them to teach a lesson to Muslims. However, Shashi Tharoor, paradoxically says that they themselves should also learn the lesson first. Again, through the character of Mohammed Sarwar, Shashi Tharoor reminds all the Indians, of the message given by great Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal who, in his poetry, has ever warned and admonished all the Indians, without any discrimination, that they should come to sense and realize their heritage. In one of his poems, he writes:

*Tumhari tahzeeb khud apne khnajar se khudkushi karegi
Jo shakh-i-nazuk pe aashiyān banega, napaidar hoga.* (R 67)

The meaning of the couplet goes as follows:

What he's saying is that ours is a civilization that will commit suicide out of its own complexity, he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction. (R 67)

Thus Shashi Tharoor points out that Muslims are part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality; indeed, without them India is incomplete. They have become the essential element and have their dole of share in the making of India. In an interview with Juhi Parikh, Shashi Tharoor, talks about his concern on the wrong understanding of history which results in a number of collisions:

The themes that concern me in this novel: love and of 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 the unknowability of history, the way in which identities are constructed through an imagining of history; and finally, perhaps, the unknowability of the truth. (Tharoor, Shashi. Interview with Juhi Parikh. "You can't feel the country's pulse...." May, 2004, http://www.shashitharoor.com/interviews/divao_504.htm.)

To conclude, we may quote Paras Dhir who writes:

Highlighting the conflicts in politics, Tharoor talks about the politicians of India who were responsible for Hindu- Muslim partition, the status quo existed at that time and how it was handled at their advantage. The politicians exploit the mob psychology in the name of religion. As far as the shifting paradigms of power politics are concerned, the politics, instead of art of governing, has become the master art of mis-governance. The rule of law has been replaced by misrule by law and rule of lawlessness by rules and regulations... The power hungry hawkish politicians with their hellish and fiendish power politics stratagems are flirting and prostituting with religion for their personal and political gains... But, we, instead of learning lessons from the past repeat them with more vehemence. Hence, chaos, disorder, violence and riots have taken permanent place in our society. This sordid and squalid state of affairs has made India to appear godforsaken land. To rebuild and establish 'Ram Rajya' is impossible. There is no sign of any progress. But the thousands of people have become the victim of the soil of Ayodhya. (Shashi Tharoor's Riot: Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture. <https://rupkatha.com/shashitharoorsriot.php>)

Works Cited

- [1]. Ashcroft, Bill. "Forward." *Arundhati Roy: Critical Perspectives*. Ed Murari Prasad. Pencraft International, 2004.
- [2]. Dhir, Paras. *Shashi Tharoor's Riot: Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture*.
- [3]. Volume 1, Number 1, 2009 I Full Text PDF DOI: 10.21659/rupkatha.v1n1.02 <https://rupkatha.com/shashitharoorsriot.php>.
- [4]. Nair, Uma. "Once Upon This Time." *The Asian Age*. August 19, 2001. Online. /books/riot/asianage.
- [5]. Parween, Shagufta. *Rethinking History: A Study of Shashi Tharoor's Riot as a Postmodern Historiographic Metafiction* www.ijird.com February, 2014 Vol 3 Issue 2. http://internationaljournalcorner.com/index.php/ijird_ojs/article/view/134406.
- [6]. Tharoor, Shashi. "Beyond Boundaries" *The Indian Express*. July 22, 2005.
- [7]. Interview. <http://www.shashitharoor.com/reviews/riot/readings/22riot.html>.
- [8].Interview with Juhi Parikh. "You can't feel the country's pulse...." May, 2004, http://www.shashitharoor.com/interviews/divao_504.htm.)
- [9]. *Riot*. Penguin Books, 2015.
- [10]. The Pioneer. 18 August 2001 https://shashitharoor.in/review_details_fiction/25.