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SHASHI THAROOR'S *RIOT*: A STUDY OF THE CULTURE

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ABSTRACT

The present research paper deals with Indian Culture in Shashi Tharoor's fiction *Riot*. It is a book of great moral, social, religious and political complexities. It brings into focus the secular credentials of India along with highlighting its cultural and religious pluralism. The novel explores the social and cultural aspects of contemporary India. Undoubtedly, the concept of culture is a complex one and in recent years it has become a site for heated discussion. Indian national identity is based on the celebrated ethics of unity in diversity or pluralism. This unique plurality and diversity has given India a unique cultural identity. No other country in the world has witnessed the growth and functioning of so many castes, creeds, cults, cuisines, languages, religions and faiths at one and the same time of history, and, what is more interesting is the fact that in spite of so many diversities there is an underlying current of unity which occupies the focal point in the exploration of Shashi Tharoor's fiction.

Keywords: unity in diversity, pluralism, castes, creeds, cults, culture, language, religions etc.

Culture is one of the most complicated and comprehensive words having a vast range of issues and concerns. It has gained much popularity and significance in contemporary times, be it the focus on the individual or the collective life or the appreciation of arts and artifacts or the whole way of life of human beings. Some anthropologists consider culture to be social behavior. The term 'culture' has a complex, multifarious history and diverse range of meanings in contemporary discourses. Different anthropologists use it differently. According to E. B. Tylor: "Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 18) on the other hand Samovar and Porter state, "Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving" (Gripaldo, 121).

This definition emphasizes that culture is a social heritage and is the gift of society to mankind. However, anthropologists have made a distinction between 'culture' and 'civilization'. Culture is regarded as the moral, spiritual and intellectual attainments of man, whereas civilization is something like outside and consists of the culture, technology and social institutions. Civilization reveals the external properties and development of man's achievements whereas culture encompasses all forms of art, ideas, languages, forms of

worship, architecture, dress and handicrafts, which contribute to its continuity and richness. It means culture does not include only art, music, dance and drama but a whole way of life.

Culture and literature are closely related with each other. Literature is more than a realistic depiction of human life. It highlights the whole panorama of human life by subsuming in it the cultural aspects of the society including its belief, knowledge, values and practices. Edward Said acknowledged the interrelationship among literature, culture and society thus he said, "Too often literature and culture are presumed to be politically, even historically innocent; it has regularly seemed otherwise to me, and certainly my study of Orientalism has convinced me that society and culture can only be understood and studied together" (Said, 27).

Further, literature embodies social, cultural and universal values which can affect human life in various ways. A literary work is an organic work, holding within it a number of cultural themes. As Terry Eagleton says, "Literary work itself comes to be seen as a mysterious organic unity, in contrast to the fragmented individualism of the capitalist marketplace: it is 'spontaneous' rather than rationally calculated, creative rather than mechanical" (Eagleton, 17).

Literary creation has its roots in various social spheres such as language, economics, politics, race, ethnicity, class, gender and culture. A text thus is an organic unity of socio cultural relations, racial differences, religious ideologies, class conflicts, gender biases, etc. One can view the web of human relations and values of a society through it. The study of literature of a country, therefore, can be enlightening.

African literature, for instance, puts before the international audience various cultural aspects pertaining to Africa. It is through the means of literature that the international audience becomes aware of the 'life' of various countries. Indeed history and the press can keep people informed of other cultures, but literature takes them closer to human life and hence, more appealing. Thus, isolating culture from literature is impossible as literature depicts human life that is deeply embedded in a particular culture.

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*, published in 2001, is the third novel of Shashi Tharoor which surfaces on the literary scene as a dexterously and intricately designed expressive piece of fiction. Meditating upon India's socio-cultural values and conflicts, and political uncertainties, the novel not only emerges as an earnest quest to comprehend the sub-continent encumbered by her labyrinthine issues, but also highlights the universal implications of post-colonial society of the nation. Besides its social implications discussed in detailed, *Riot* also emerges as a fictional critique by a diasporic author, representing the communal unrest of the Indian society. Tharoor reveals the annoying hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims of independent India by exquisitely amalgamating communal differences with other issues in *Riot*. With the backdrop of the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid issue, the novel is an attempt to examine the reasons behind the persisting communal resentments between Hindus and Muslims as well as the genesis of the problem termed as the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid dispute. Tharoor gives an unbiased expression to the feelings of both Hindus and Muslims in his *Riot* through Ram Charan Gupta, a leader and religious activist, and the latter through Mohammed Sarwar, a Reader in the History Department at Delhi University.

In his novel *Riot* Shashi Tharoor portrays multiplicity of themes and conflicts of people, attitudes, philosophies, religions, loves, and hatred, race and gender issues in a different and new way and gives it an organic shape. Ramlal observes, "Tharoor's quest for novelty continues in *Riot*, a love story set in recent troubled times of communal tensions in India. Tharoor, presents his characters with sensitivity and understanding, deftly bringing out the complications of a multicultural society" (Sharma, 141). *Riot* is a novel about the history, love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism and the impossibility of knowing the truth. *Riot* narrates the story through journal entries, interviews, letters, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, extracts from personal diaries, and conversations.

Shashi Tharoor's works normally resound with rhetoric of multiple socio cultural affairs. *Riot* is also not an exception to the rule. Some of the great reviewers appreciate its concern with the multiple kinds of social,

political and cultural affairs in varying degrees. Shobori Ganguli finds it touching a rather raw nerve of contemporary Indian Politics.

The novel was published in the wake of the 'Hindutva' forces struggling to reclaim their identity. This struggle for reclaiming identity provoked communal riots all over the country resulting into senseless killing. Amidst this highly volatile and violent spectrum of the contemporary period, Tharoor dared to publish his novel dealing with a highly controversial issue. This novel was published with two different covers; the one for Indian readers which had a picture of riot on it whereas the other one for the Western readers having the Taj Mahal with subtitle - *Riot: A Love Story*. The novelist obviously has two different sets of audience for the same story. He also reveals the East-West encounter through a love story, albeit a tragic one, which results in the death of Priscilla - the American. The background of the Taj for riot also evokes images of the Moghul dynastic rule in India whereas the cover page that depicts an actual riot serves to the reading audience of the negativity of hate. Tharoor takes on the role of a social commentator when he creates awareness of the plight, oppression, suppression and atrocities on women and many loopholes in our society.

Divided into eighty sections of varying lengths, *Riot* lacks any grand narrative and is made up of fragmented, petite narratives. Disjunctiveness and a lack of cohesiveness constantly pervade the novel. This fragmented writing which is characteristic of postmodern writing highlights myriad issues concerning individuals, cultures, ideologies, religions and their collisions. Thus *Riot* emerges as a conglomeration of diverse points of view. These views expressed through fragments of narratives possess an astonishing variety and are placed by the author before the reader in the form of a puzzle that the latter unravels giving coherence to the whole.

The novel moves deep down to the cause and then explores the various implications that India has experienced in the past fifty years because of it. It carries within it cultural, historical, social, political and literary aspects which truly make it an Indian English Novel giving us a thorough insight and understanding of India and the communal problems it is facing.

Primarily, the novel revolves around the story of an American volunteer Priscilla Hart, who is in Zailgarh, a small district from Uttar Pradesh, working with the non-governmental association HELP-US. Priscilla Hart is a 24 year old, slim blond blue eyed American who is involved in developing awareness among females about population control. Her father's job had brought her to India when she was fifteen. Being the only Indians she comes across during this period are the servants, the lower class with all its poverty, the bazaars, the movies, the temples and the mosques. She works actively for the social service league, reads to the blind children, helps at the Catholic orphanage and cares for the underside of this society'. But during this stay an incident changes her life; one afternoon she finds her father in bed with his secretary Nandini, ultimately leading towards a divorce between Rudyard and Katharine. Priscilla cannot forgive her father for this, "But I cannot forgive him. Not just for doing what he did, hurting Mom, destroying the family I'd always taken for granted. But also for being careless enough and thoughtless enough to do it there, in Mom's and his bed, on that afternoon and letting me find him. I hated finding him like that . . . it was awful" (Tharoor, *Riot*, 79).

After 9 years Priscilla is back to India to work in Zailgarh, a district town in Uttar Pradesh. Apparently nothing in India has changed during this period, except the increase in population. Zailgarh comes alive in her poem *Christmas in Zailgarh*. The poem penned by her in her scrap book on 25th December 1988, describes Zailgarh as town with mist of dust, cow dung sidewalks, rusting tin roofs, walls with red betel stains and angry black slogans with dirty brown men in their dirty dhotis and – "sad-eyed women clad in gaily colored saris, clutching babies, baskets, burdens too heavy for their undernourished bodies" (Tharoor, *Riot*, 15). This novel also talks about the plight of women and the readers come to know about it with the help of Ali Mohammad's treatment to his wife Fatima Bi and same can be explored with the lines composed in *Christmas in Zailgarh* as:

.....They listen to me,
They go back to their little huts
Roll out the chapattis for dinner

Pour the children drink of sewer water
Serve their men first, eat what is left
If they are lucky, and then submit unprotected
To the heaving thrusts of their protectors (Tharoor, *Riot*, 15).

The novel begins with the series of 'spoof columns' in the *New York Times*, reporting the murder of an American girl Priscilla Hart in the North Indian town of Zalilgarh, to be followed by excerpts from personal diaries, letters, journals and interviews. It compares and contrasts the occidental and the oriental societies rekindling the memories of a colonized India or rather of any erstwhile colony. Juxtaposing the 'blacks' and the 'whites' belonging to the contemporary postcolonial times in the novel, Tharoor effectively portrays the divergent attitudes and thought processes of not only those once colonized, but also of the people belonging to the western world of the colonizers, decades after the end of colonialism. These two antipodal societies and cultures (colonizers and colonized) are represented by Priscilla Hart and V. Lakshman, respectively, in the novel, and through them the novelists dwells upon the continuity of racial differences despite the official end of colonialism from the face of this globe.

Besides discussing her love life in the letters, Priscilla in her letters to Cindy also deliberates upon the contemporary social issues of the Indian society. Issues such as women empowerment, the lives of the poor, the bureaucratic system, belligerence between Hindu and Muslim fanatics and also her experiences at work that force her to remark, "Population-control' awareness seems more of a misnomer to meBeing forced to have babies is just one more form of oppression of subjugation by men," find expression in these letters" (Tharoor, *Riot*, 171).

Tharoor has also used a random but meticulous representation of the story with the help of transcripts from the journals written by Lakshman. These excerpts not only mirror his personality, his likes, dislikes and obsessions in life but also express his passionate love for Priscilla and his deliberations upon his married life and family. Unaware of the fact that despite being 'Lakshman' himself with a six year old daughter called 'Rekha', he had crossed his own 'Lakshman - Rekha', he forsakes his morals, his scruples and his principles simply to seek excitement in the love he receives from an American girl whom he ultimately betrays. The novelist portrays the dilemmas that Lakshman persistently experiences both in his interior monologues as well as in his conversations with Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police, and Priscilla herself. With emotions vacillating between a young foreigner's love, having no obligations--personal or professional—and the love of a six year old daughter and her mother, not to speak of the obligations of his profession, Lakshman undergoes an emotional and psychological turbulence. A helpless slave to his passionate desires, he finds himself incapable to remain sincere to his faithful wife and loving child. Although guilty, he indulges in the immoral act repeatedly and even considers abandoning his world in India so as to go to America with Priscilla.

Randy Diggs's notebook is also used by Tharoor to give an unbiased account of the story. During his sojourn at Zalilgarh, Diggs with the intention of gaining more information about the riot meets Ram Charan Gupta, the local Hindu leader, and Professor Sarwar, a Muslim historian. He further meets Lakshman, the District Magistrate and Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police of Zalilgarh. The conversations recorded by him in his notebook are adequate clues to the simmering hostility between the Hindus and the Muslims and the bureaucratic attitude towards the communal problems in India.

Further excerpts from Katharine Hart's diary reveal the doubts that she has regarding her daughter's death, which is considered to be a consequence of a communal riot. Although she is never able to know the truth about Priscilla's murder, as she is only aware of the official account, yet having talked to Lakshman she senses Priscilla's relations with him.

Another pertinent account that one finds in her diary is the account of the local hospital of Zalilgarh, where she met Kadambari's sister, suffering from major burns. Shashi Tharoor himself has confessed in many of his interviews that the novel is full of collisions of various sorts -- personal, political, emotional and violent.

This major voice has tried to solve different kinds of global problems as a senior official of the UN for more than two decades. Besides, he has searched the way-out of pacifying communalism and violence plaguing Indian society to a great extent. Naturally, this novel discusses various types of conflicts between individuals, between cultures, between ideologies and between religions.

The novel deals with a book of great moral, social, religious and political complexities. It brings into focus the secular credentials of India along with highlighting its cultural and religious pluralism. The novel explores the social and cultural aspects of contemporary India. Tharoor brings before us some burning and relevant issues which may threaten the dignity and peace of our nation. The demolition of Babri-Masjid ignited Hindu-Muslim riots and the worst aftermath of it was the brutal killing of many innocent people. So the relevance and sanctity of religion, secularism, democracy, human values, decency, personal freedom, god and goddess, power and politics etc. in India are again open to discussion and are being addressed but in a fictional garb.

It portrays the disastrous upheaval in Hindu-Muslim relationship brought about by Ram Janam Bhoomi - Babri Masjid dispute. The novel begins with pre-independence Hindu-Muslim unity and ends with the riots pertaining to Ram Shila poojan widening the rift between the two communities. Hindus and Muslims have lived together in peace and harmony for centuries. They have, especially in the North India, an extraordinary tradition of heroes-warriors or saints who are worshiped by both communities. One hears a lot about the composite culture of North India. A number of Muslim religious figures like Nizamuddin Aulia, Moinuddin Chisti, Ghazi Miyan are worshiped by Hindus. Hindus and Muslims fought together the war of independence in 1857. They were in a joint campaign in the Khilafat agitation against the British Government who systematically promoted divisions between Hindus and Muslims as a policy of 'divide and rule'. The Muslim League broke away and called for Pakistan. As a consequence the country was partitioned in 1947. The decades since the partition have witnessed several communal disturbances pitting one group against the other. Mohammad Sarwar strongly says in *Riot* as, "Muslim didn't partition the country- the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did" (Tharoor, *Riot*, 111).

Thus, Tharoor's *Riot* is a fictional departure in the career of Shashi Tharoor as a writer. Here he takes liberty with the fictional form. The story is unfolded in an unconventional style through news paper cuttings, interviews, letters, journals, poems and even birthday card. This helps him in portraying and perceiving a single event from various angles. Several aspects of India as a nation are explored through the characters of the novel. Each character stands as an ideology articulating its views. The social condition of India is presented through many characters the foremost among them is Priscilla, an American social worker. Her father Rudyard Hart, the senior Marketing Executive with Coca - Cola, who has been in India in late seventies, explores the industrial facets of the country. Randolph Diggs, the New York journal reporter, probes into the political and religious side of India. Ram Charan Gupta is a Hindu spokesman who articulates Hindu ideology whereas Mohammed Sarwar gives vent to Muslim views. He raises his voice against the "composite culture" or "composite religiosity" (Tharoor, *Riot*, 64). V. Lakshaman, the District Magistrate and Gurindar Singh the Superintendent of Police are the custodians of secular democratic fabric of the country which does not make discrimination in terms of caste, creed, language, religion, region or gender. In fact, Shashi Tharoor himself stated once, "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" (Dhir, <http://www.rupkatha.com>). Tharoor's this statement rightly expresses the core elements of the said work, *Riot*. The most important part and concern of the said novel is that Shashi Tharoor deals with the balanced and impartial scenario in which different views and opinions of the different communities have been taken into account. Every issue has been politicized and the innocent beings like Priscilla suffered.

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