



## History-Fiction Interface in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

Prof. (Dr.) Jagdish Batra\*

There are no two opinions about Shashi Tharoor being a versatile personality: he is an acclaimed writer, a suave diplomat, a conscientious politician, an extraordinary orator, a committed human rights activist and so on but primarily he is a writer. Starting his career in 1978 with the U.N.O., he rose to be its Under Secretary General. In the aftermath of the end of cold war, Dr. Tharoor held many key posts. He was the official candidate of India for succession to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2006, and came a close second to the present Secy.-General Ban Ki-Moon. Our focus here is his contribution to the world of letters. He is an award-winning writer of a dozen books of fiction and non-fiction. His fictional work, bearing a rather unusual title *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is considered a classic and has run into 28 editions so far.

Tharoor's novel *Riot* is not merely a stylized work; it is also a thought-provoking work of fiction. Published in 2001, well after the notorious riots that followed the Dec. 6, 1992 demolition of the Babri mosque, the novel places the plot in February--October 1989 time-frame. It deals with the build-up of tension between Hindus and Muslims in an obscure town, culminating into a major conflict claiming some human lives. This account of recent history is amalgamated with a romantic relationship between the collector of Zalilgarh, the zero point, and a young American girl who was associated with an NGO working for the welfare of women. The story gives ample opportunity to the writer to bring up the cultural differences between India and America. Apart from these, Tharoor focusses on the process of history writing and hints at its inadequacies and limitations. In these postmodern times, history is believed to be subjective and contingent rather than objective and eternal. Hence the ambiguity and lack of finality to the issues touched in the novel.

The story begins with a twenty-four year old American girl Priscilla Hart coming to Zalilgarh, a fictitious place in India, to work on a women's health project. It is clear that she possesses the idealism of youth which brings her so far away from home. A torrid love affair develops between Priscilla and V. Lakshman, the collector of the district. As the latter is a married man with a daughter, this extra-marital affair brings in its wake a lot of tension which forces him to call it quits finally, but then it is immediately followed by Priscilla's death. While they are together, they discuss love, religion, customs etc. from their cultural positions. Months before Priscilla's death, tension had been brewing in Zalilgarh as firebrand Hindus linked to R.S.S. had been mobilizing people for building a Ram temple at Ayodhya. A procession was taken out by the Hindus which was attacked by some Muslim hotheads leading to violence in which some people lost their lives. The timing of Priscilla's death coincides with the communal clashes but it remains unclear till the end as to who killed Priscilla.

Priscilla's parents, who are divorced, travel to India to find out the cause of her death. An American journalist accompanies them. As their investigation progresses, the details of Priscilla's stay in India emerge slowly. Through various documents like the transcripts of meetings, diary entries, newspaper reports etc., we are told about the developments. The novel also includes discussions on the communal build-up on the issue of the Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. All the stakeholders, namely, Hindu and Muslim leaders, administrative officials et al make their viewpoints clear.

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\* Prof. & Ex. Dean, O.P. Jindal Global University, Sonipat, India Email: [drjagdishbatra@gmail.com](mailto:drjagdishbatra@gmail.com)  
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The first thing that impresses the reader upon opening the book is its narrative style. As mentioned earlier, Tharoor has used a *mélange* of formats like transcripts of interviews and conversations, newspaper reports, diary and journal entries etc. to convey the story. This style makes it more convincing for the readers who, unconsciously though, look for the primary source of information. Secondly, the jumbling up of different textual forms in the novel lends a metaphorical touch to the scrapbook which the protagonist of the novel Priscilla Hart used to maintain and which was reported missing but actually handed over as a souvenir by the Superintendent of Police Gurinder Singh to his friend Lakshman, the district collector, who was deeply in love with Priscilla.

The narration is not linear and there is frequent back and forth movement through time. The narrative is even broken in parts as in the case of the interview which Randy Diggs had with the S.P.; it spans the pages 126-34, 148-54 and 172-79. The piecemeal disclosure of information has been done at strategic spots in the text. The language used is quite simple which, but for the loaded theme and long discursive passages, could have placed the novel in the category of popular fiction.

The reader gets different viewpoints of a single event/ issue. This technique was effectively used in *Rashomon*, an award winning film made in 1950 by a Japanese director Akira Kurosawa. It was a crime thriller in which different characters – a bandit-rapist, the woman, her husband, a priest and a woodcutter – all had different stories to tell of a single incident (*Rashomon* 1950). This distrust of a definite truth comes to the fore when Lakshman tells Priscilla:

“The Truth! The singular thing about truth, my dear, is that you can only speak of it in the plural. Doesn’t your understanding of the truth depend on how you approach it? On how much you know?”

She bites her lip. “Either something is true, or it’s not,” she says at last.

“Not so my darling,” I declare. “Truth is elusive, subtle, many-sided. You know...” (137)

As such, the text can be said to have the *Rashomon* Effect. Oscar Wilde seems to be Tharoor’s favourite litterateur as he has been quoted umpteen times in the novel. Truth has been defined by Wilde as ‘one’s last mood’ (204).

Another stylistic device is soliloquy – a part of the stagecraft, which has been used by Tharoor in the form of letters written by Priscilla to her friend Cindy Valeriani in which she writes unhesitatingly about each and every development, but no letter from Cindy appears in the novel, nor is there any hint of a response from her in the letters written by Priscilla. On the whole, the fragmentary style of narrative fits in well with the fragmentary nature of reality recognized in postmodernism.

It is not merely the style that reflects postmodernist leanings; Tharoor’s views on history, as deduced from the overall philosophy of this novel, also show a postmodernist bias. The novel provides his views on a number of issues concerning our society and politics. He is for an inclusivist approach so that opposition, of any type, can be accommodated. That is the basis of longevity of Indian culture and religion as also of the success of democracy in our country. He, therefore, is not afraid of dissent. On several occasions, Tharoor has been known to celebrate the diversities and contradictions found in India. Raising a toast to the resilience of Indian democracy, Lakshman remarks, ‘We have given passports to a dream, a dream of an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country’ (45). This approach has brought into mainstream those who had radical differences. A clear example is the Indianization of communism as manifest in the participation by the various Communist parties, particularly the CPM, in general elections to which they were fundamentally opposed. Lakshman also lauds the ‘world’s first and farthest-reaching



affirmative action program’ (44) to counter the ill-effects of age-old discrimination against the untouchables. ‘So Hinduism is the best antidote to Marxism’ (43), he concludes.

On the issue of communal tension, Tharoor deems it best to present the different viewpoints and then, like a true artist, leave it to the reader to judge for himself. With regard to the Babri mosque which became a bone of contention between the Hindus and the Muslims, Tharoor starts with the views of the majority Hindu community expressed by Ram Charan Gupta as he is interviewed by the journalist Randy Diggs (52-62, 120-24). Gupta, a member of the RSS, is a hardliner who criticizes the appeasement of Muslims, like the provision of Muslim Personal Law at the cost of common civil code, ban on owning of land by any non-Kashmiri in Kashmir etc. He dreams of building a Ram temple at Ayodhya and thereafter take up the disputed sites at Mathura and Kashi. Ram Charan quotes historical evidence also:

There is plenty of historical evidence for our claims. Joseph Tiffenthaler, an Austrian Jesuit priest who stayed in Awadh between 1776 and 1781, wrote about how the famous temple marking the birth of Ram had been destroyed 250 years earlier and a mosque built with its stones. A British court even pronounced judgement in 1886, and I quote: “It is most unfortunate that a masjid should have been built on land specially held sacred by the Hindus.... But as the event occurred 356 years ago it is too late now to remedy the grievance. All that can be done is to maintain the status quo...Any innovation could cause more harm and derangement of order than benefit. (120-21).

Lakshman, the district collector is proud to be a Hindu but the Hinduism that he practises is not the narrow-minded, sectarian, ritualistic type; it is eclectic and liberal. It is symbolized by the Vedic *sloka* his father had taught him which means ‘Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions of the universe’ (146). Therefore, while members of other communities feel proud in being what they are, ‘the Hindus say they are proud to be ...secular’ (146).

The opposite view-point of Muslims is articulated by Prof. Mohammad Sarwar, a Muslim historian, who is in Zalilgarh to do research on one Ghazi Miyan, worshipped as a warrior saint by both Muslims and Hindus of the area. He draws his inspiration not from Jinnah but Maulana Abul Kalam Azad, who felt that by demanding a separate country, the Muslims separatists were only disowning the large country that India was. ‘India is not complete without us, that we are no less Indian than the most chauvinist Hindu.’ (110). He looks at the demand for Pakistan raised in pre-partition days in a different light. Rather than settling for what he calls ‘second-class citizenship, a result of our association with the original sin of Partition’, he would want his fellow Muslims to assert before Hindu bigots: ‘I am as entitled to it [India] as you are’ (110). He rues the day when Jinnah and his followers acted, ‘in the name of all Indian Muslims, to surrender a portion of our entitlement by saying that the homeland of an Indian Muslim is really a foreign country called Pakistan’ (110).

The history of two-nation theory lies at the root of the Hindu-Muslim conflict, ‘But who owns 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?’ asks Sarwar. (110). He feels that the Hindus ‘want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge’ (147). This indeed is the crux of the matter but only if ordinary people – the ones who shout slogans for one party or the other, could transcend the time slot they occupy and have a bird’s eye-view of a broader slice of time!

Sarwar is peeved over the ‘demonization of collectivity’ (113) – over his co-religionists wanting him to change his liberal ways. He castigates the Rajeev Gandhi government for kowtowing to the conservative Muslim lobby in the infamous Shah Bano case. He is determined to ‘resist this minority complex that the Hindu chauvinists want to impose’ upon him (114). Minorityism is only



a mindset and not a demographic reality for him. This is the picture of an ideal Indian Muslim but then Sarwar is not a stereotypical Muslim; he is also a learned historian.

A historian has a different kind of straitjacketing; it is the discipline – the epistemological format of his subject that he is called upon to abide by. As a historian, Sarwar expresses inability to admit the existence of Ram. If true, then pin-pointing the exact place of lord Ram's birth is well-nigh impossible. According to him, Ram temples did not exist before tenth century even though the text might have been there as an epic and not as a sanctified scripture. 'The Rama cult, and its offshoot the Bhakti movement, rose during the period of the Muslim conquest of North India and the establishment of the Delhi sultanate, when Hinduism was on the defensive' (182).

The administration looks at it from the standpoint of law and order which aspect is discussed by the superintendent of police when he is interviewed by the journalist (126). Gurinder finds fault with both sides. The tension had been building up as the Ram-Shila puja (worship of bricks to be used in building the Ram temple) was in progress. On the eve of the fateful day, some Muslim bikers stabbed a Hindu youth. Next day, as the Hindu procession started, some elements in it incited the Muslims with their provocative sloganeering. The police had made elaborate bandobust to thwart any trouble, but both the sides seemed to have made preparations for a violent confrontation. At one point in the narrow street, the procession was attacked with a crude bomb which badly injured a Hindu youth. The collector quickly took away the injured in his car to the hospital, but the news of attack spread like wild fire and led to clashes in which some people lost life. Priscilla also died around the same time.

Since the developments concerning the demolition of Babri mosque and the movement for building Ram temple belong to recent past and are fresh in public memory, there is hardly any need of evidence for it. Coming to the ground reality at the local level, Tharoor, as per his own admission, drew upon the ground-level experience of Harsh Mander, a former civil servant who published *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten People* giving the account of communal riots that took place in Khargone in Madhya Pradesh where he was posted at the time of communal flare-up. Many of the details of communal clashes, the Ram Shila Pujan programme, the procession taken out on Sept. 30, 1989, hurling of the bomb from the double story house, handling of situation by the DM and the SP, rationing 10 kilograms of wheat to all families in the dalit basti, the prejudiced judicial officer, the local MLA etc. have clear affinity with the details given in Mander's book (190-200). As such, these lend a touch of authenticity to the narrative by bringing in history-fiction interface.

Tharoor takes potshots on different political parties for their opportunism. He finds the communist parties double-faced. Sarwar was a student leader in his college days and had met Rudyard Hart who was employed with the coca cola company. The convoluted views of the young communists can be gauged from the way a female student guzzled coca cola – an American product – proclaiming that it was her 'way of exploiting the exploiter!' (87) The same girl grew to be a teacher in an American university.

On the opposite side, there is also the naïve viewpoint of an American – Rudyard Hart, Priscilla's father, who enlightens Mohammad Sarwar on the Indian problem "You have too much history. Far more than you can use peacefully. So you end up wielding history like battle axe, against each other. Whereas we at Coke don't care about history. We'll sell you our drinks whatever your history is. We don't worry too much about the past' (205). America is known for its lack of history – that probably is taken to be a blessing by Hart.

But where the West tried to comprehend India, it came up with a skewed approach – Orientalism, as Edward Said named it. The Orientalist approach of the West is also castigated in the novel. Ram

Charan is at pains to point out that the West cannot comprehend the contentions and complexities of India – ‘a country whose population is more than fifty per cent illiterate but which has produced the world’s largest pool of trained scientists and engineers’ (231). Ram Charan tells Randy Diggs:

Even before you arrive in Delhi, you foreign pressswallahs already have your biases, stereotypes, predilections about India, and they never change with experience. Some of your clichés are romantic ones: John Masters, Ganga Din, the Bengal Lancers, Kipling’s innocent Western jungle boy surrounded by the dark animals of the Hindu kingdom – you know them all. But their stories are not my stories, Mr. Diggs. You are writing Western stories for a Western audience and telling them you are writing about India. (229).

Apart from the Babri mosque imbroglio, this novel also mentions the feelings of the Sikh community in the wake of the Operation Bluestar to flush out the Khalistan militants from the precincts of the Golden Temple (194). While it created the likes of Simranjeet Singh Mann who spearheaded radical politics, people like Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police at Zalilgarh, were persuaded by a victim’s family in his own community to continue to be in service. Without passing any judgement, Tharoor, like an artist, only presents the two options. The hint cannot be missed that politics in India has created hurdles in the path of national integration.

That the politicians in India queer the pitch is no news. To present these politicians in true light, the artist in Tharoor changes tack. As he did it in his acclaimed novel *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor tries his hand at light verse here also. His poem ‘Advice to the World’s Politicians: How to Sleep at Night’ written in blank verse fits in the context. It lambasts the politicians who, unmindful of the sorry state of affairs around them, have a sound sleep:

No, do not think  
of the solitary tear, the broken limb  
the rubble-strewn home, the choking scream;  
never think  
of piled-up bodies, blazing flames,  
shattered lives, or sundered souls.

Do not think of the triumph of the torturer  
the wails of the hungry,  
the screams of the mutilated,  
or the indifferent smirk  
of the sleek. (92)

Tharoor does not spare the middle class and takes them to task for their complacency and lack of concern for others. In the poem ‘I am an Indian’ (95), he details the routine of a well-to-do Indian:

I am an Indian, with a roof above my head;  
When I’ve had enough of the working day, I fall upon my bed;  
My walls are hard, my carpets soft, my sofa cushions red.  
What kind of an Indian? You said.

The artist in Tharoor is at his best when he describes the affair between Lakshman and Priscilla. They had chosen a deserted old building at one end of the town. It was called ‘kotli’. Priscilla would reach there on Saturdays on her bicycle which she would discard in the shrubbery. After a while, the collector would drive up to that place, leave the car in the care of the driver at some distance and go meet the girl in a room. They had sex regularly and neither of them was a novice in the art. As the details that came to light after Priscilla’s death indicate, the driver had sensed it. Who killed her remained a mystery. The finger of suspicion could be raised at many people. Priscilla had been active in creating awareness among women regarding family planning. A pregnant Muslim woman, frail in health and already a mother of seven children, had been advised by her to go in for abortion

without bringing it to the knowledge of her husband who would have objected to it. He did come to know and vowed to wreak vengeance on the helpless foreigner.

Geetha, the collector's wife had been informed by Gurinder about the affair between Lakshman and Priscilla. She even approached a godman to do some puja, 'use tantra, do the tandava, use anyone and anything' (227). The collector himself could be a suspect since he had first promised to marry Priscilla but then went back on his promise. The reason, at first, was Priscilla's previous affairs in America and later the concern for his daughter Rekha who loved him very much. Finally, the communal clashes could claim the life of any one who happened to be at 'the wrong place at wrong time'. It was explained to Priscilla's parents that she might have been seen in that 'out-of-the-way place' by the Muslim fanatics who used that place to make bombs and fearing that she might alert the administration may have eliminated her. Priscilla's scrapbook which her mother tried frantically to find had already been given by the S.P. to the Collector, his old friend – as a keepsake! How interested parties can 'play' with the evidence is amply brought out by the way the mystery behind Priscilla's murder is kept intact. While the district collector Lakshman excuses himself on the pretext of shortage of time, the police chief Gurinder Singh beats about the bush and would not like to come to the point while talking to Priscilla's parents.

Tharoor, in the true vein of an accomplished artist, presents the different aspects of a conflict. He seems to stand aloof while the characters make known their varying perceptions. If one wishes to get hold of Tharoor's views, one must turn to the second section (pp. 55-109) of his non-fictional work *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone*. He also makes a reference to this novel *Riot* in his article 'The Politics of Identity' in this book. His approach to the communal problem is shaped by his liberal views and his appreciation of the differences and complexities found in India. In *Riot*, Lakshman and Sarwar come closest to Tharoor in regard to the latter's philosophy.

Towards the end of the novel, while talking to journalist Randy Diggs about Priscilla's murder, Lakshman asserts that the administration also wants to know the truth. At the same time, he remarks, "Whose truth? There's not always an easy answer" (236). The mystery behind the murder is juxtaposed with the mystery surrounding the authenticity of the Ram janmabhoomi. The suggestion is clear: if one cannot come to a definite conclusion with regard to an event that took place a few days ago, how could we be sure about what happened centuries ago. Considerations such as these have cast a spell of doubt in our times on the entire process of history writing. Leaving aside the accepted historical evidence, therefore, the advocates of new historicism give equal credence to non-historical records also.

The debate on the historicity of the Ram Janmabhoomi still continues and may never come to an end. On the one hand are the discredited historians with their doubtful paraphernalia. On the other are the keepers and practisers of faith for whom tradition is more important than any factual information. True, the Babri mosque was built in 1528 and since then, there have been many political moves, both by the British rulers of yore and by the indigenous governments in the state to serve their ends. The religious leaders did their bit to confound the issue.<sup>1</sup> However, the story of Ram has come down to us through the collective memory of people of India spread all over the length and breadth of the country. There are a number of places and temples linked to the characters and events of Ramayana both in India and Sri Lanka. Tempers normally run high when there is a confrontation between followers of two different faith systems. Markandey Katju, former chief justice of the Supreme Court of India and present Press Council of India chairman has rued the naïve mindset of the majority of people which helped continual communal clashes in the country. Creating conflict was very easy here. "All somebody had to do was make a mischievous gesture of disrespect to a place of worship and people start fighting one another." ("Reunification").



However, Tharoor being a postmodern writer, must treat history and fiction as not very distinct categories. The postmodernists do not find much of difference between the way of writing of history and literature. In fact, historians have long been using the narrative mode of history-writing. The facts are located and then these are joined with the help of a narrative justifying mostly the cause-effect approach. If the narrative is not amenable to this approach, they would try some other approach like part-whole, topological or contextual. Also, the historians are selective in the choice of evidence and are guided by their ideology. Salman Rushdie, who has used history in the manner of a postmodernist narrative in his *Midnight's Children*, underlines the role of historian rather than of history in carrying the people along, through the power of narration, Saleem Sinai aptly remarks: 'What actually happened is less important than what the author can manage to persuade his audience to believe' (263).

Through their historical narrative, the historians have been romanticizing, interrogating and problematizing history. Hayden White rightly emphasizes that 'the techniques and strategies that they [historians and novelists] use in the composition of their discourse can be shown to be substantially the same, however different they may appear on a purely surface or dictional level of their texts' (121). Apart from the contingent knowledge of the topic at hand, what are common to a historian and a writer as they render reality in their individual ways are their prejudices, misconceptions, imagination and command of a very inconstant medium, i.e., language. As such, we believe now that historical records are not absolutely true but relational and open to multiple interpretations. On the other hand, the novelists have taken themes liberally from history and depended on history for structuring their works. For example, Walter Scott introduced into historical setting imaginary characters, situations etc. to make the plot viable and interesting.

Linda Hutcheon, a leading theoretician of our times, has fine-tuned these considerations into the concept of historiographic metafiction. Alluding to the line of demarcation drawn earlier between literature and history, she comments:

However, it is this very separation of the literary and the historical that is now being challenged in postmodern theory and art, and recent critical readings of both history and fiction have focused more on what the two modes of writing share than on how they differ. They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. But these are also the implied teachings of historiographic metafiction. (Hutcheon 105)

The novel *Riot* resonates with Hutcheon's formulation. Tharoor has also commented obliquely on the writing of history in this novel. In his view, all viewpoints are to be taken into consideration just as all formats – journals, diaries, newspapers, letters etc. have been brought in to construct the plot. The novel is indeed an artist's rendering of reality in the manner of historiographical metafiction.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>In a book *Ayodhya: The Dark Night* (HarperCollins) launched recently, co-authors Krishna Jha and Dharendra K. Jha have come out with the story of how 'on the night of Dec. 22-23, 1949, an idol of Ram Lalla "mysteriously" appeared inside Ayodhya's Babri Masjid, setting in motion a chain of events that was to



change the course of Indian politics in later decades.' The plan at that time was to 'pitchfork Hindu Mahasabha as a major political player in post-independent India.' (Bhattacharya)

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Dr. Jagdish Batra is Professor Emeritus of English, SRM University, Delhi-NCR Prior to this, he was Professor and Dean (Languages), O.P. Jindal Global University. Positions held earlier by him are Principal and Head of PG English Department in different colleges. He has around four decades of teaching and research experience and has guided 50 research scholars. His areas of specialization are Indian English Literature and Culture, on which he has presented papers at and chaired many international conferences in India, Europe and South-East Asia. Recipient of many awards and a former Rotary Study Exchange Scholar to USA, Prof. Batra has published ten books, 70+ research papers and a number of general articles.