

Plurality of Truth: A Narrative Analysis of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is a very unconventional novel. The notion that in a culturally, and religiously diverse country like India truth can never be singular, is very much visible in the course of this narrative. In the rendition of the story, many uncomfortable histories of postcolonial India is represented with distinctive style keeping in mind their relative importance to the novel. This postmodern text touches many sensitive themes while dealing with the many lives of its characters. One such theme is truth, thus the paper tries to analyse the narrative structure of the novel so as to unravel the multiplicity of 'truths' in its ambit.

Keywords: Polyphony, Ignorance, Pluralistic, Non-linear, Writerly, Epistolary.

Unlike the common murder mysteries, which begins at a point and then follow a sequence of discovery and disclosure. Here the novel moves from an apparently certain act of murder as a casualty of communal riots to a highly unsettling but connected list of possibilities. The novel begins at the end, with a newspaper report of the murder of the heroine, Priscilla Hart, who was in India as part of the fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation. This paper attempts to study the unique narrative style employed by Tharoor and to face the many 'truths' of the characters and the story itself.

The novel does not simply trace the events in the life of Priscilla leading to her tragic death but many other important issues are brought into notice. Implied in the story is the search for truth, an ultimate truth (if such a thing exists) about many events and also answers to some culturally contesting narratives.

The search for Priscilla's killers runs parallel with the search for clues to the deaths of two locals that sparked the riot, and also with a search for the historical facts about the Ramjanambhumi-Babri issue. All are in vain, however, for in a multicultural and pluralist society, such things as truth are necessarily pluralistic, as the novel makes very clear. (Agarwal 142)

The multiplicity of voices and reported accounts from different points of view gives; one, a dialogic touch to the novel, another it lends the story verisimilitude. Tharoor uses journalistic reporting, diary writing, and interviews to depict reality from a multiple point of view that concerns his story. All the important voices are honestly recorded and presented as such. This polyphonic nature of the story is discernible from many angles.

It [polyphony] operates not only with the transcribed dialogues among the characters but also the implicit voices of the characters i.e. the thoughts and consciousness of the different characters. It also includes the implicit and explicit voices of the novelist and even the voices of the readers. The readers engage in dialogue with the text and communicate with it. (Mohammad 286)

The beauty of the novel lies in the way the author presents a very balanced picture of the views of different communities, and what really emerges is the conflict of communities rather than the conflict of religions. Pointing to the multiplicity of perspectives Paras Dhir says:

Riot marks the emergence of a new perspective vis-à-vis fictional . . . Instead of giving expression to some already existing reality or worldview the novel develops into a kind of discursive formation of ideas and an expression of divergent views forming specific relations to historical events. Hence the historical events as well as the fictional happenings depicted in the novel offers multiplicity of perspectives and provide different versions of historical as well as the fictional truth. (34-35).

Though the obvious quest in the story is the mystery behind the murder, still many other details comes in. A great part of the novel focuses on issues other than the love story of Priscilla and Lakshman. It in a way justifies the title of the novel—that there is a riot of the

accounts. It break the harmony of the narration and digress the story. If that is so, then, is the love story a counter-narrative to the communal riot or vice versa? As answer to this question would be that, in all its nakedness the love story was a 'riot' in itself where passions run high, adultery committed, limits crossed, lives destroyed and people killed in mysterious circumstances.

The use of the different length of entries, use of different fond and forms of communication, and typical manners of speech is used amply in the novel to give it a touch of reality.

It may therefore be observed that by using sections of varying lengths constituting pieces and fragments of crucial information, the author has assiduously constructed a non-committal and fragmented yet smooth discourse/discourses in the novel. (Sharma 153).

The unconventional narrative style and the complex plot is, thus in a way is aesthetically satisfying: as the plot resolves, the myriad parts start making sense; the reader can feel a moment of relief and triumph. Commending about this deviation from the common style, Shagufta Parween says:

Unlike the prevalent customary style of a single narrative voice dominating the novel, it is aligned to Bakhtin's concept of heteroglossia and consists of differing utterances. The narrative builds up through the operation of different voices, with the proponents of distinct *weltanschauung*, worldviews which are often contrary and colliding. . . . Its polyphony provides space to representatives of different groups from the diehard fanatic Ram Charan to the tolerant pacifist Laxman or Sarwar, from the American Priscilla and Randy Diggs to the native Fatima bi and Geetha. (57)

Anachrony is vividly visible in the rendition of the narrative. The analepsis and the prolepsis both are equally employed by the author to carry the story forward. There is no linear chronology in the narrative and the story is presented in bits and pieces. It points to what Lakshman says in the novel, ' . . . something in which you can turn to any page and read. You pick up chapter 23, and you get one thread of plot. Then you go forwards to chapter 37,

or backwards to 16, and you get another thread (136).’ This confirms that like always Tharoor is striving for novelty in fiction. Novelty was a prominent feature of his very first book, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Here also he dares to employ some novel method, very different from his earlier works. Ramlal Agarwal in a review of the novel *Riot*, writes:

[Here] the tone of the narrative is continually shifting, as is the point of view. But technical innovations apart, Tharoor presents his characters with sensitivity and understanding, deftly bringing out the complications of a multicultural society. (141)

By utilising this nonlinear writing style, constraints of time and tradition are thrown away and the story can be told in ways which keep the readers totally engaged and continuously guessing. Lakshman stresses this concept, ‘Let your readers bring themselves to the book they’re reading! Let them bring to the page their own memories of love and hate, their own feelings of joy and sorrow, their own reactions of disgust and pity, their own stirrings of courage and pride and compassion (Tharoor, *Riot* 136).’ The readers are kept on their toes and has to work their way out of the confusion and labyrinth of testimonies. The reader is forced to become an investigator in reading the story. He/she has to listen to the different testimonies, believe them, try hard not to get distracted from the main story and then finally to fix the fragments together to get a complete picture. Something similar is done by the American journalist, who has to listen to the different narratives to get to the truth. The journalist who is to unravel the mysteries of the murder, gets more interested in the riot and the unique history of India. He gets busy in understanding the politics behind the riot and the “circumstances” under which Priscilla was murdered. He fails to follow the instruction from Wasserman foreign desk:

GRATEFUL YOU LOOK INTO STORY IN GREATER DETAIL FOR LONGER FEATURE PIECE. WHO THE GIRL WAS, WHAT SHE WAS DOING, HOW SHE WAS KILLED, WHY. (9)

In the narrative structure, the initial murder mystery is kept as it is and other details and stories are brought into light. The reader is almost left quizzing, when would they talk of Priscilla and her murder? The novel in a way writes the multiple truths of independent India and the histories of the myriad communities it holds safe and secure in its bosom. Every

community has its own truth to live with and their own history to guide the future. The novel and the novelist attempts to bring forth the multiplicity of truth and history, and tries to fix them together. Every representative character has his own truth and justifications to prove it. Professor Mohammed Sarwar, is one such example. Speaking to Randy Diggs, he talks about the history of India from his point of view- a Muslims point of view. He being a trained historian, questions the Hindu chauvinist attempts to overwrite history, he questions the history of history itself:

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? (110)

The method of using documents, diaries and newspaper accounts to drive a story allows the author to maintain an omniscient and objective viewpoint while also revealing character traits that might otherwise go unnoticed. This ensures a multiple level of narration, the narrators becoming the narratees and vice versa. The story is told at different levels of observation and in unique styles. Styles which are omnipresent as idiosyncrasies of individuals and characters in a society.

This heteroglossia presents the form in which different dialogues are presented. Bakhtin names it the social diversity of speech types that he discovered in the novel. The nature of the form of the *Riot* is dialogic which allows other voices to participate in the novel. It provides the readers with other interesting dimensions of a particular subject that the novelist deals with in the novel. The heteroglossia helps achieve multiple realities rather than one definitive unchanging meaning imported by the novelist. (Mohammad 286)

This technique involves the reader and he becomes an active member in the search for the truth. He becomes a witness to the testimonies and a repertoire of different accounts narrated. The narrative leave no easy way for the reader to tread and reach the destination, but

presents clues and hints as signposts on the way. He is no more passive but active and participating.

Among other things there is a collection of letters and notes, exchanged between Priscilla, Cindy and Lakshman. This take the story further into the realm of personal lives and connects the individual and the communal. The exchange of letters and notes employs the epistolary technique of storytelling, credited to Samuel Richardson and his *Pamela* (1740) for being the first example of the epistolary novel.

The novel has four newspaper reports (New York times), four personal diary entries (Katharine Hart), one cable message for Randy Diggs, six notebook entries by Randy Diggs, fifteen tape recorded transcripts of Interviews, five scrap book entries by Priscilla Hart, fifteen letters among different characters at different point of time, twelve journal entries of Lakshman, conversation records among the characters and last but not the least a birthday card from Rekha to her father Lakshman. It seems that Tharoor has Henry Fielding in mind while dividing the book into small, complete, interesting chapters. Fielding in *The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews And of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (book II), in the chapter named ‘Of Divisions in Authors’ discusses such a division of the chapters and books, for the greater benefit of the readers and the writers. Similar ambitions are of Lakshman, the District Magistrate of Zalilgarh. His idea of a novel would be:

I’d like to write a novel . . . 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. . . No, what I mean is, why can’t I write a novel that reads like—like an encyclopaedia? (Tharoor, *Riot* 135)

Thus it seems Laxman and his creative ideas of a novel is guiding Tharoor here, or on the contrary the former is a mouthpiece of the latter. It’s hard to figure out.

Among the many truths of the story, one truth is that the murder of Priscilla was inevitably connected with the riot rampant in the town. Thus first to understand it and the circumstances under which it happened is important before any further investigation on Priscilla. Lakshman, the district magistrate confesses this logic to Randy Diggs, ‘I’m not

trying to avoid talking about Priscilla Hart. I just want to complete the picture of this riot for you, Mr. Diggs, so you understand what we were dealing with during those days (165).’ In a way they are reminding the reporter of his duty and what should he focus on. They direct his attention to the main story—the investigation of Priscilla Hart’s murder. In the wake of the riot, Randy seems to have forgotten about the main issue itself and is involved in understanding the medieval and modern history of India. Giving the details about the riot, Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police justify the necessity of digression in understanding the whole picture. He speaks to Randy Diggs, ‘Priscilla Hart. I knew you wanted to talk about Priscilla. I’m just trying to get you to understand why we don’t know much about what happened to her. We had enough on our minds at the time. But I’ll tell you what I know, Randy (179).’

The novel presents a plurality of truth from people at different positions and in peculiar situations. In a land so large, old, and complex, things are difficult to be delineated into singular categories. Here history, mythology and truth combine so together that to differentiate one from another is a task in itself. Speaking about Rama and truth, Priscilla says, ‘What the hell does this say about India? Appearances are more important than truths. Gossip is more potent than facts. Loyalty is all one way, from the woman to the man (63).’

Reading the novel, in a way, is the investigation of truth itself. There are countless peoples and events presenting the truth dear to them, for instance, the truth Gurinder knows, the historical facts Sarwar knows and the truth Priscilla knows and believes; are all truths of different kinds and positions. Writing to Priscilla, Lakshman speaks about the ethos of a pluralist, secular India and its truths, “Ekam sad viprah bahuda vadanti”—“Truth is one, the sages give it various names.” Isn’t this all-embracing doctrine worth being proud of? (147).’ These ‘truths’ make up a labyrinth of the accounts and further reinforces the subjectivity of truth itself. In the meeting with the Hart’s and Randy Diggs, Lakshman again reiterates the plurality of truth.

You’re quite right, Mr. Hart, you’re both interested in the truth. Indeed. The truth. You know, that’s my government’s official motto: “Satyameva Jayate.” “Truth Alone Triumphs.” It’s on all our letterheads—and on this

visiting card I've just given you. Truth Alone Triumphs. But sometimes I'm tempted to ask, whose truth? There's not always an easy answer. (236)

Truth when presented convoluted and tampered, remains no more a truth. Tharoor emphasis the unattainability and unauthenticity of truth. Lakshman writing to Priscilla says about truth, 'Truth is elusive, subtle, many sided (137)' and continues further '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? (137). Thus even after the truth has been shared with the readers, it is Priscilla's mother who is the only person who feels that there is something more to be understood: that there is another truth which she is deprived of.

I'll never know what happened to my poor baby. Perhaps it's just as the official said it was, and she was surprised by criminals, or surprised them in the act. They must have thought it was her life or theirs. But what was she doing there? It doesn't make sense.

Except, perhaps, in the terms India believes in: Destiny. Fate. Karma.

Maybe it was God's will, and all one can do is to accept it. She died where she would have wanted to have lived. (260)

Like *Roshomon* here the truth has multiple angles, and possibilities, thus no final, trustworthy account of the act of murder. Ram Charan Gupta is not even ready to listen to it, he says to Makhan Singh:

I don't want to know. Don't tell me anything, Makhan. . .

So many possibilities . . . But I really don't want to know, Makhan.

Sometimes, when you are in the position I am in, ignorance is bliss, Makhan. And I am a blissful man tonight. (262)

In conclusion, the narrative study reveals almost all the obscure facets of this uncommon novel, but not all. The main question, the mystery of Priscilla's murder is left out. The murderer or murderers are never pointed out, at the end nobody knows who murdered

her. No exact answer is presented by the author, but keep the readers guessing and the investigation continue. This in itself is an achievement on the part of the narrative. Shagufta Parween lauding such an attempt says:

Moreover, by leaving the mystery of the death of Priscilla Hart unsolved it hints not only at the impossibility of gaining access to the past, but even interrogate our own interpretation and thinking of the past. (59)

The novel ends by continuing the newspaper report, which began at the beginning of the story. This is a very unique closure of the narrative, full of scope for further investigation and interpretation so much so that it is a perfect example of a writerly text. Not like the other traditional novel here the narrative brings the reader to a very different kind of denouement. The narrative cannot be called teleological in strict sense as the end fails to give proper shape and coherence to the preceding narrative. Talking about the closure Abbott Porter says:

Closure is therefore best understood as something we look for in narrative, a desire that authors understand and often expend considerable art to satisfy or to frustrate. If the object is to satisfy this desire which is often the case- it can't be satisfied too quickly, because we seem also to enjoy being in the state of imbalance or tension that precedes closure. In fact, narrative is marked almost everywhere by its *lack of closure* (53)

The narrative leave some arguments and questions unanswered and the “omniscient reader” has to do his homework to fill in the gaps. Despite this and the unprecedentedly innovative technique the novel succeeds to hold the attention of the reader till the end and beyond.

We are held this way until the final moment of closure, though there are also instances, and not infrequently, when a narrative will fail to close altogether. And this, too, can have its satisfactions. (53)

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