

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 analyze 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 begin at a point and then follow a sequence of discovery and disclosure, this markedly unconventional piece of fiction reverses the norm. It begins with the murder of Priscilla Hart and then investigate it. Her murder is reported by a newspaper but the many things that led to her murder are presented in bits and pieces. 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 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 presentation of the story in such a unique style has its own advantages as it very beautifully records all the different voices in the narrative which accounts to the different point of view of the many characters in it. Also, this gives a dialogic touch to it and things and events in the novel seem to be almost real. Tharoor uses journalistic reporting, diary writing, and interviews to depict reality from multiple points 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)

This results in balanced depictions of the views and attitudes towards common issues in the novel, reinforcing the idea that it is the conflict of communities rather than personalities. 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).

The focus of the novel is definitely the mystery behind the murder, but many other issues come to the fore. To a large part, the narrative traces 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. This digresses the story from its focus on the riot. So, the reader is forced to ask whether there is a riot in a love story or a love story amidst a riot. The easy answer for it would be that the love story was in itself a ‘riot’ of sorts, as passions run high, things get out of control and innocent people got killed as a result. Tharoor had used different sources of various length and size to capture the many entries related to the murder which gives the novel 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, 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 an important part of the narrative. The analepsis and the prolepsis equally used by Tharoor smoothly takes forward the story without rupturing the aesthetic appeal of the novel. No linear chronology is followed in the novel and to a greater part is same as 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).’ It again highlights Tharoor’s attempts to add some novelty in his works of fiction, as it was a prominent feature

of his very first book, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Here also he again shuns the conventions and dares to employ a different and unique style to present the story, as 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)

The nonlinear writing style, in which hurdles like time and tradition are kept at bay resulting in keeping the reader on his/her toes, who like the detective of Agatha Christie has to look out for the hints and be 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 make all efforts to come out of the confusion and make sense of the story. In doing so he becomes more or less an investigator of sorts as he listen to the different point of view, the testimonials of characters and had to try hard to not to get distracted from the main plot. This is what is exactly done by the American journalist reporting Priscilla Hart’s murder. He is in India to unravel the mysteries of the murder, but 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? A vast country like India is full of diversity of culture, language and religion. At the same time the various communities living in it has different accounts of the same history and Tharoor in the novel is able to present it in its stark brilliance. The novel

very beautifully brings out this facet of incredible India and presents it to the reader. 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 tell a complicated story allows the author to a great extent to remain objective and at the same time present idiosyncratic traits of the characters in the novel. The story is told at different levels of observation and in unique styles.

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 leaves 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.

In all these testimonials used in the novel, there is a large number of letters between Priscilla, Cindy and Lakshman. These letters bring on the personal lives of the major characters in the novel and results in the final connection between the individual and the

communal. They 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 scrapbook 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 are guiding Tharoor here, or on the contrary, the former is a mouthpiece of the latter. It’s hard to figure out.

Amongst all the truths of the novel is the truth about Priscilla’s murder, during the riot in the city. 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).’

It seems that they are reminding the American journalist of his job. His job to find out how and who killed Priscilla Hart instead of taking interest in understanding the nuances of Indian history. 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 accounts of the same truth and why not so when it deals with a country like India. A country so big and difficult to understand would present many truths as a combination of history and mythology. Speaking of 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)

When Truth is manipulated so much it remains a truth no more. And this is exactly what Tharoor wants to stress – the unconformity 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* (1950) 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, by the end, the novel answers almost all the questions raised within its narrative framework, but not all. The most important question of Priscilla's murder is completely left out and the readers are never told who killed her. This in a way is partly an achievement of the author as it keeps the attention of the reader glued to the text and at the end leaves him musing, who killed Priscilla? And the investigation continues. 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 different closure for the novel, leaving ample chances of

investigation and contemplation on the part of the readers thus making it a brilliant writerly text. Unlike the traditional novel, it gives a different sort of denouement to the readers as at the end no solution or coherence to the narrative tension is provided by the author. 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 leaves some important questions unanswered, some riddles unsolved and here the reader has to work his way out and connect the dots. But Tharoor despite using such an innovative style is successful in keeping the reader's attention in the story to 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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