

**Review**

## Riot: A Novel; A Postmodern Narrative

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Devoid of a circumscribed landscape of its own postmodern fiction is rather fluid and unstable enhancing its exuberant and experimental nature, and a large segment of contemporary fiction is characterized by its attributes. Having entered the cultural discourse the pluralistic and inconclusive line of thought and attitude, associated with postmodernism has further problematized and intensified the ambiguity associated with it. The present article is an attempt to analyze and highlight how Tharoor's inconclusive and pluralistic approach associated with postmodernism, has problematized both the thematic as well as the technical aspects of the narrative of his book *Riot: A Novel*. The ingenuity and the indeterminacy of the style adopted by the author, and its correlation with the plurality of life that articulates its varied perceptions--discussed both in isolation as well as in cohesion with the text -- establish *Riot* as an exemplum of the fluidity and the ambiguity characterizing the frail margins of postmodern fiction.

**Keywords:** plurality, fluidity, ambiguity, inconclusive, indeterminacy

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### INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor's book *Riot: A Novel* establishes him as one of the most prolific chroniclers of the contemporary lives and times of his homeland. Seeking to examine some of the most vital issues of our times on a smaller and a more intimate canvas this award winning novel is a gripping tale that encapsulates the problems afflicting present day India. Set amidst the violent sectarian clashes in North India in 1989 the novel revolves around a twenty – four year old New York University doctoral candidate Priscilla Hart, visiting the small town of Zalilgarh in North India as a volunteer with the population control organisation HELP-US. Her concern for the local women of Zalilgarh accompanied by her sincere efforts to extenuate their grievances; and her passionate affair with the local District Magistrate followed by her untimely death a few days before she was due to return home forms the central core of the story . A few days after her

murder her divorced parents Katharine and Rudyard Hart visit India together in search of answers to queries regarding the circumstances that led to their daughter's mysterious death. However, despite their persistent efforts the Harts are forced to return unsatisfied convincing themselves that their daughter's end had many personal and political reasons behind it. Tharoor however, zooms out of the narrow precincts of a murder of an American on to a much broader canvas that portrays the all too fragile communal relations in the Indian sub – continent, and brings to light the belligerence and intolerance between the Hindu and Muslim fanatics of the country. Thus cogently addressing innumerable concerns and issues confronting contemporary India, the novel surfaces as a potent statement on the essence of the Indian society and its ethos, bearing testimony to the profound intimacy that the

author, an expatriate to the West, shares with India and her people. It does not only dwell upon the characteristic sub-continental complexities but also foregrounds issues that have a global credence while unfolding and interrogating the complicated personal, social and political milieu of the quintessential small town of Zailgarh in Northern India. A poignant tale of love and betrayal the novel is meticulously coloured by the political circumstances in the country, the fanaticism on which it thrives and consequently the sufferings of the ignored part of India especially her women.

This apparently realistic and simplistic rendition about India and her people, however does not find an equally simple expression through the author's pen. On reading the novel one encounters a veritable riot of ideas, beliefs, moods, styles and perspectives that merge into a larger rubric stretching across culturally different continents and societies. Tharoor begins his narrative with a series of spoof columns in the *New York Times*, reporting the murder of an American Girl Priscilla Hart in the North Indian town of Zailgarh, and then uses excerpts from personal diaries, letters, journals and interviews to continue his narration. At the same time as one reads the text he is caught up in an imbroglio of issues raised by Tharoor. It is this fluidity evidenced both in the technique adopted by Tharoor and his theme that problematizes his narrative alluding towards its postmodern character. The following argument essays to provide a critique of these complicated and unconventional narrative methods adopted by him, and correlates them with various postmodern attributes underlining the essential postmodernity of the novel.

### The Unconventional Narrative

Divided into seventy eight sections of varying lengths, *Riot* lacks a grand overarching narrative -- a meta narrative and is made up of fragmented, petite narratives. This unconventional technique adopted by Tharoor undermines the authority of a conventional and a normative Aristotelian narrative. A fragmented narrative consisting of smaller ones like spoof columns, excerpts from notebooks and scrapbooks et al accompanied by dialogues, *Riot* is apparently a collection of randomly presented discourses, defying the strict succession of events and thus the conventional linearity of the plot. Apparently obsessed with experimentation in the art of writing fiction Tharoor uses a murder as its pivotal event and unveils the various pieces of incremental information he has about Priscilla through a variety of short narratives to his readers who 'decode' the story and the chronology of events on the basis of these scraps of information, leaving the novel open for interpretation. 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. These sections help in unfolding the story in a two-tier system the first one running through records, entries and letters and the second one moving along interviews, conversations and interrogations. Every single short narrative highlights a perspective about Priscilla Hart and her personality, her universe, her past her present and also the tragic flaw of her character which might be seen as one of the reasons contributing to her death. Further, these pieces of narration explore the socio-political conditions of the place in which she lived and worked besides exploring the conditions entrapping her in circumstances leading to her death. It may also be emphasized that although every single fragmentary narrative is an independent whole in itself wherein an individual story not only begins but also ends, yet the fragments possess interrelatedness among them. However, since all these narrations, in whatever form, are separate and possess an individuality of their own each having a complete story therefore the reader may take the liberty of reading it in any order without missing the essence of the story. Thus it is perceived that despite possessing the potential to be read in any order, the novel does not lose on its readership as the readers enjoy a sort of facile interconnectedness among its different parts.

### The Pluralistic Approach:

This unconventional narrative wherein Tharoor begins with spoof columns in *The New York Times* so as to introduce the major event around which the novel revolves and moves on to the use of a fragmented narrative complicates a rather seemingly plain and simple story that begins with the news of a murder. It evolves from an investigative to a romantic, social and political treatise on contemporary India's predicaments, concluding without answering any of the questions it raises. Instead of simply echoing tradition, the novel vividly exemplifies a 'pluralistic text' which does not confine itself to a single profound meaning or style. Owing to the variety of techniques adopted accompanied by its multivalent and polysemic nature, the novel possesses the potential to be read a number of times by the reader who surfaces with a different yet equally justified perception each time, thus adding to the richness of the text. While the miscellany of ideas and techniques used by the author in the course of the narrative capture the reader's attention and do not allow the feeling of ennui to dominate the experience of reading the text, the sequence of dissociated experiences and observations, each possessing its own individuality in the novel, emphasise its problematic and destabilised environs, a consequence of the coexistence of diverse and at times

dichotomous discourses in a society.

This potpourri of divergent narratives exemplified in the novel, manifest an eclecticism that envisages a wide variety of devices and genres that are used meticulously to foreground the dimensions of multi – perspectivisation leading to a pervasive sense of the lack of singularity of thought, indeterminacy and inconclusiveness. Conspicuous by its absence of a normative linearity of flow the novel is essentially a collage of journalistic reports, diary entries, letters, memoirs, excerpts from scrap books and journals, transcripts of interviews and conversations overheard that in turn constitute a plethora of small discursive narratives each one having its own story. Apparently therefore, the author indulges in experimentation with narratology and is quite successful in his endeavour to take liberties with the fictional form, and add some kind of novelty to it. This amalgamation of varied forms of expression emphasises the role of Warhol's postmodern 'hybridity' in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*, similar to the subsequent 'multi – valency' which Charles Jencks had considered to be mandatory to postmodernism (Glen Ward, 1997). Tharoor's respect for the validity of myriad styles of writing and the plurality of experiences and apprehensions they are invested with draws a parallel with Howard Fox according to whom the postmodern object strives towards an encyclopaedic condition , allowing a myriad of access points , and an infinitude of interpretive responses (Steven Connor,1998).

### A Simulation of reality

As confessed by Tharoor himself, the genesis of *Riot : A Novel* can be traced back to two historical events – the first being the simmering Hindu – Muslim discontent of 1980's culminating in the violence concerning the disputed Babri Masjid at Ayodhya , an account of which he received from a friend of his in the form of a detailed description about a riot in Khargone , Madhya Pradesh , and the second being a report of the death of an American women in a racial riot in South Africa . Tharoor coalesces both these events with exemplary brilliance and dexterity creating the story of his text *Riot* ( Choudhury, 2001). This merger of the two historical incidents is illustrative of the use of 'pastiche' a major postmodern ploy conceptualised by the critic Fredrick Jameson . The author duplicates two real life incidents in the novel without having anything intelligent to say about them and exemplifies how despite the distances, sociological differences, diversity of cultures and ways of life in this world, humanity remains a simulacrum for itself. He touches upon a variety of issues in the process of recreating these two real life incidents effectively utilising them as mere vehicles to foreground a number of problems inflicting the Indian society. With pastiche and

simulation emerging as Tharoor's favourite postmodern techniques in the novel it is observed that his genius is apparently explicated in the poise and the skill with which he blends a variety of dichotomous circumstances and predicaments , besides the breath – taking innovations with which he embellishes the novel .

### Deconstructing the conventional 'narrative':

An emphatic opposition to the globally valid meta – narratives Tharoor's technical experimentation in *Riot* undermines the authority of a conventional and a normative narrative. It interrogates the singularity and the simplicity synonymous to the traditional narrative by indulging in micro narratives thus defying the logical succession of events and breaching the normative linearity associated with such narratives. Unequivocally opposed to the Aristotelian guidelines of a proper beginning, middle and end, the novel also emerges as a contradiction of Nicholas Marsh's view which states that a novel consists of an exposition in the beginning to be followed by a resolution via complication (Nicholas Marsh, 1987). The beauty and the significance of this unconventional structure of the novel are emphatically underlined by none other than Laxman--Priscilla's lover--who aspires to write a novel relinquishing the linearity of the romantic narrative and resorting to a fragmented narrative. Such repeated comments upon fiction and the art of creating fiction in the person of Laxman (a character of the novel) speak volumes about the self - reflexive and self – conscious nuances of *Riot*. By analysing and critiquing the literary styles used by fictionists while writing their works in this novel, Shashi Tharoor categorically makes an instructional statement about the creation of fiction technically synonymous to his concurrent endeavour thus elevating *Riot* to the position of a meta-fiction in the process.

Concurring with Tzvetan Todorov who reiterates that a strict succession[of events] can only be found in stories with a single character, *Riot* seems to propound that the minute there are more than one character in a work of fiction events and thought processes become simultaneous and the story multi-linear rather than uni-linear (Tzvetan Todorov,1988). Consequent to the dissonant voices of the various characters a lack of cohesiveness internalizes itself and constantly pervades the narrative in *Riot*. This fragmented 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. Unlike the traditional pieces of fiction since *Riot* appears to be

devoid of a real centre and varied ideas, events and characters seem to occupy that position, these isolated events, actions and conversations between the various characters in the novel need to be connected, comprehended and resolved by the reader instead of the author, the narrator or any of its characters. Consequently, the universally acknowledged omniscient narrator's role is entirely undermined in the novel reinforcing the views held by one of its own characters who states "Down with the omniscient narrator. It's time for the omniscient reader" (Tharoor, 2001). Hence Tharoor draws a parallel with Roland Barthes' argument justifying that "the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture" through this novel of his (Barthes, 2005). The alert omniscient reader referred to by Tharoor persistently gropes for evidence throughout the course of his reading of the *Riot* and draws his conclusions. Thus asserting its postmodern proclivities, a reader oriented text advocating the subjugation of the narrator to the reader, *Riot* unequivocally explicates Barthes views in his essay 'The Death of the Author', wherein he criticizes the romantic model of a novel by saying that "the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author" (Barthes, 2005).

### Playing with language

It is further observed that championing Barthes' postmodern concept which differentiates 'a work' (example a novel) from 'a text' *Riot* successfully adheres to his connotations of textuality that highlights the way a text is put together. A polesemic bricolage, this novel also exemplifies the astute and deft techniques used by Tharoor to form a correlation between the novel and the Hindu religious text *Ramayana*. Using his innovative skills of combining and permuting concepts and ideas he resorts to the ploy of 'onomastics', and names as well as characterises some of his characters in the novel according to the *Ramayana*. Thus laying a strong foundation for the story he intends to narrate, Tharoor names the American girl Priscilla as a 'Hart' (a stag), victimised by Laxman. This relationship draws a parallel from the *Ramayana* wherein Lord Ram kills a stag because of its beauty. Further despite being 'Lakshman' himself (an idealised character from the epic *Ramayana*) Tharoor's character infringes the sanctity and the discipline proclaimed in the Hindu text *Geeta* by betraying his wife with the same name. A father of a six year old daughter 'Rekha' Lakshman, ironically crosses the 'Lakshman – Rekha' (a line drawn by Lakshman for Sita in the *Ramayana*) of commitment and morality. In this way by satirizing both the much professed sanctity of the Hindu culture and the literature from which it flows, the *Geeta* and the *Ramayana*, *Riot* exhibits the

Baudrillardian concept of 'simulation', in which the epic *Ramayana* becomes a free – floating sign, images of which are produced endlessly in this society. This anchorage in religious texts exemplified by Tharoor in *Riot* alludes towards its 'intertextuality', other than the language games that it harbours upon. These language games and intertextual styles that the novel replicates, further highlight the fact that a reading of this book is both a process of 'decoding', – interpreting the codes to infer its meanings and 'encoding', - reading one's own cultural codes into it for a reader not well acquainted with the *Ramayana* and the *Geeta* would take recourse to the former process, and if it is otherwise he would also encode the text. However, both these concepts of reading a text, do not remain confined to the above discussed parameters and can also be observed at many other places in the novel.

### CONCLUSION

Embellished by diverse themes, valencies and meanings, Tharoor's *Riot* which addresses its readers through fragmentary, short and realistic narratives therefore is not only an example of the importance of the smallest discourses / micro-narratives each possessing an individuality of its own, but also emphasises their incommensurable nature. Nuances like the instability and lack of objectivity with respect to the premise of the novel leading to indeterminacy and inconclusiveness are both a result of an acceptance of a variety of interpretations towards it as well as a consequence of the interrogative attitude encouraged by a postmodern outlook. A marvellous outcome of repeated permutations and combinations of isolated events and characters the novel does not only possess an opulence of postmodern nuances like pluralism, parody, pastiche, eclecticism, intertextuality and simulation besides others but also emerges as a self conscious and self reflexive piece of fiction deliberating upon as well as critiquing the art of writing fiction.

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