

Sectarian and Domestic Violence, Political and Cultural Issues in Shashi

Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

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Riot: A Novel is written by Shashi Tharoor. He writes this novel as he is writing history of this nation. His way of writing is journalistic. Tharoor uses postmodern narrative technique in this novel. He uses diary writing and interviews to reveal reality that is concerns of his novel. The story of the novel is told from multiple viewpoints. There are no linear chapters of the story. We come to know the story of the novel through news reports, interviews, scrapbooks, letters, diaries, notebooks and poems. The story moves back and forth after the incident of Priscilla Hart's death. This novel is about history, love, hate, religions, clash between two communities on the basis of religion, cultural clash between India and America,

status of woman in India. Language, caste, class, region, and religion are five major factors of division in India. Religion is the most sensitive source of division in India. The present paper attempts to study these issues of modern India.

The novel begins with the killing of Priscilla Hart by mob during the riot between Hindu and Muslim in 1989. She was doing research for a doctoral degree at New York University. She was doing field research in the Indian town of Zalilgarh. She was a volunteer of HELP-US a group run by the American to control population. She was spreading awareness among women for their rights. She had the dream to do some good for the people of Zalilgarh. Her father, Rudyard Hart said:

“I want the world to know what she was doing in India, the cause for which she gave her life” (4). She was a simple and very modest girl. She was so friendly with the people of Zalilgarh. She loved the Indian people. Is no one or everyone responsible for Priscilla’s death? This question remained unsolved. The reason of Priscilla Hart’s death is given by embassy spokesman that she “may simply have been in the wrong place at the wrong time” (1). Several hundred Indians have killed in religious violence. And this violence in the name of religion is devouring lives of Indian people continuously.

Her parents, father Rudyard Hart and her mother Katharine Hart visited India to know the reality behind the death of Priscilla Hart. When Katharine met Shankar Das the Project Director of HELP-US, he told her about the main target of HELP-US group. They are working to raise the consciousness of women which would make impact on their family and on society as a whole. Priscilla

loved district magistrate Lakshman. She wanted to live with him but he was married man. Laksman does not want to lose Priscilla but he cannot make her his part of life. He is worried about his wife Geetha, his daughter Rekha and their future life. It is impossible for Lakshman to leave his family for Priscilla. Katharine knows that it is Lakshman to whom her daughter was attracted. Lakshman met Priscilla every Tuesday and Saturday at Kotli to have sexual pleasure. It remained secret that Priscilla was carrying Lakshman’s child.

Lakshman is a good, honest, and straightforward person. He tells Priscilla about the conflict between Hindus and Muslims. It is a dirty game playing by politicians. How it is right to take revenge from today’s Muslims which had been done wrong to Hindus by Muslims four hundred and fifty years ago. It is the politics of twentieth century which is creating conflicts between two communities. According to his

understanding, in Hinduism “faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. Build Ram in your heart, the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will matter little where else he is, or is not” (145).

Politicians of all faiths across India seek votes in the name of religion, caste, and region. They are trying to urge voters to define themselves on these lines. They seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities. Lakshman says:

If the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same way in the 1980s? by doing what you propose to do, you will hurt the feelings of the Muslims of today, who did not perpetrate the injustices of the past and who are in no position to inflict injustice upon you today; you will provoke violence and rage

against your own kind; you will tarnish the name of the Hindu people across the world; and you will irreparably damage your own cause. Is this worth it? (146).

Lakshman gives the example of Mahatma Gandhi who said that Hinduism does not teach us to hate Islam or non-Hindus. Bigots are inciting Hindu mobs to take revenge from Muslims. “They think that they are taking country back from usurpers of long ago. They want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge” (147).

An American journalist, Randy Diggs meets Ram Charan Gupta to find out the reasons behind the riot. Ram Charan Gupta is a local Hindu fundamental leader who supports Hindu people and construction of Ram Temple at Ayodhya. Ayodhya is the Ram Janam Bhoomi, it is the birthplace of Rama. They want to build grand temple to Lord Rama.

Mr. Gupta tells him the history of Ayodhya. Many years ago there was a great temple, Hindu people from all over India would come to worship Ram. When a Mughal emperor Babur came to India, he destroyed the temple and replaced it with a big mosque, which was named after him, the Babri Masjid. Mr. Gupta says:

A mosque on Hindu's holiest site! Muslims praying to Mecca on the very spot where our divine Lord Ram was born. Naturally Hindu community was much hurt by this. Is that so surprising? Would Muslims be happy if some Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca. But what could we do? For hundreds of years we suffered under the Muslim yoke. Then the British

came, and things were no better (52-53).

Mr. Gupta says that Muslims are evil people. They should be loyal to India but they are more loyal to foreign religion Islam. He tells Randy: "Muslims are fanatics and terrorists; they only understand the language of force. Where are Muslims in power where they are not oppressing other people? And wherever these Muslims are, they fight with others. Violence against non-Muslims is in their blood" (57).

After Partition of India, Muslims in Ayodhya left for Pakistan. So the mosque was not needed in Ayodhya. Then there was a miracle happened. Some Hindu devotees found that an idol of Ram had emerged spontaneously in the courtyard of the mosque. It was a clear sign from God. His temple had to be rebuilt on that sacred spot. When Hindus went to courts, it became the matter of controversy. They said that nobody could worship there. Mr.

Gupta says that the people, who are in power, have lost their roots.

Mohammad Sarwar tries to defend the Muslims. Mohammad Sarwar is a Muslim scholar, teaching in the Department of History, Delhi University. He says that we have great tradition of heroes, whether warriors or saints, are worshipped by both communities. He gives the examples of a number of Muslims religious figures who are worshipped in India by Hindus like Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti, Shah Madar, Shaikh Nasiruddin. Hindus have complaints against Muslims. Indian Muslims have to face discrimination. There are prejudices in India. Indian people do not believe in secularism. They are activists.

The Hindu people are trying to create a new past. They are blaming Muslims. They want to teach Muslims a lesson but they have not learned many lessons themselves. The well-known Urdu poet wrote: "Tumhari tahzeeb khud apne

khanjar se khudkhushi karegi/ Jo shukh-I-nazuk pe aashiyān banega, napaider hoga- Our civilization that will commit suicide out of its own complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction" (67). Muslims are part of the indivisible unity of India. Without Muslims India is incomplete country. Sarwar says that Muslims did not divide the country. The British, The Muslim League, and the Congress party are responsible for the partition of India.

He gives the example of Maulana Maudoodi, who was against the partition of India. Maulana says that they have equal rights to live in India. On the other hand, Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the leader of Muslim League, wanted separate Muslim State. It is a tragedy that Jinnah's ideas triumphed but not Maulana's. This triumph in actual meaning is a great loss of Muslims. Sarwar says: "Pakistan was created by "bad" Muslims, secular Muslims, not by the "good" Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to

speak” (109). Islam gives the message of human equality which is the best gift Islam brought itself to India. He says: “the only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts. An India neither Hindu nor Muslim, but both. That is the only India that will allow them to continue to call themselves Indians” (116). Islam has equal claim on the soil of India as Hinduism.

Gurinder Singh, a Sikh cop whose main mission is to control the riots at any cost. He and Lakshman considered that it is futile to fight for Ram Temple cause. As Sarwar tells Randy:

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).

Gurinder also tells the sad story of 1984 riots. Indira Gandhi took the help of Sant Jarnail Singh Bhindrawala to weaken the Akali Dal. Bhindrawala wanted to create separate State (Khalistan) for Sikhs. He and his group killed whoever criticized them. They entered in Golden Temple for protection. At the order of Indira Gandhi Indian Army attacked at Golden Temple. Army besieged the place, cut off water supply, prevented food from reaching the terrorists, starved them into surrender. Many innocent people were killed in this incident. Army assaulted the temple, Sikhs' pride turned into ruins. Sikhs wanted to take revenge of this attack at Golden Temple. Two Sikh bodyguard of Indira killed her, and this was the beginning of 1984 riots.

Shashi tharoor reveals a very balanced picture of the views of the different communities. The Hindus are trying to establish their identity and the minority community, the Muslims, maintaining theirs. It is the innocent Pricilla who lost her life due to the clash between two communities. Tharoor shows that the politicians of India are responsible for Hindu-Muslim partition. They exploit the people psychologically. They get votes in the name of religion. They use religion for their personal and political gains. Lakshman in his “How to Sleep at Night” attacks the politicians. He writes:

Try to think of nothing.

That’s the secret.

Try to think of nothing.

Do not think of work not done,

of promises unkept, calls to return,

or the agendas you have failed to prepare for meeting yet unheld (90).

The relationship of Priscilla-Lakshman shows contrasting features of two cultures – Western and Eastern. They show different attitudes towards the concept of sex, love, and marriage. Priscilla represents western culture where a girl can make physical relationship with man. But in India it is considered to be a sin, if a girl makes any relation with a man before her marriage. Laksman tells Priscilla “...Zalilgarh is not America. Not America. In America you are doing such and such and so and so, but here it is different” (13). Lakshman’s wife, Geetha represents an Indian woman. Geetha is very religious and superstitious woman who represents Indian women. He tells Priscilla that she was a virgin and even she hadn’t kissed a boy. He also shares his ideas about love and marriage in Indian context. He says:

The West believes that love leads to marriage, which is why so many marriages in the West end when loves dies. In India we know that marriage leads to love, which is why divorce is almost unknown here, and love lives on even when the marital partner dies, because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society as well as our psyche (103).

The novel highlights the domestic violence against women. Priscilla wrote to her friend Cindy Vateriani about the social life of India where women do not get their deserved place in the society. They are considered as the other and marginalized. Fatima Bi suffers at her husband's hands. Ali Mohammad beats her daily. She is mother of seven children and is going to give birth to eighth child. She is living a very poor and miserable life. Her husband

tells Priscilla "I decide how my wife conducts her life" (160). Priscilla Hart describes the shocking condition of Indian women. Kadambari's married sister Sundri is a victim of male-dominated society. Rupesh, her husband, and her mother-in-law beat her frequently. They tried to blaze her. Indian people are gender biased. Women do not get respectable status in the society.

Shashi Tharoor shows the real picture of Indian society. Tharoor highlights many contemporary issues of India. The novel highlights the history of conflicts between Hindu and Muslim and a love story of Lakshman and Priscilla who belong to different cultures.

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