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## POLITICAL AND RELIGIOUS BLENDING IN THE NOVEL RIOT

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**Abstract:**

*Riot: A Novel* centres round the mysterious murder of Priscilla Hart, a young American lady who comes to India to participate in a women's health programme. On the surface level she appears to be a victim of communal riot between Hindus and Muslims. But at the deep level, the mystery of murder becomes elusive. Religious hatred is the book's central event. The novel deals with the riots between the Hindus and the Muslims over Ram Shila Nyas puja in 1989 leading Ram Janmabhoomi in Ayodhya in 1992. This historical event gets a fictional treatment in the personal relationship of the characters, beliefs and purposes in the novel. Shashi Tharoor deals with a particular situation that reveals the entire spectrum of socio-political realities of communal hatred, administrative insensitivity, and vested interest in the heart of North India. The theme of the novel goes beyond a usual communal riot and seeks to examine issues of complex nature such as religious fanaticism, cultural collision and above all, the trajectory of history. The present paper tries to analyze collisions between religions, individuals, cultures and ideologies leading to political controversies.

**Keywords:** Politics, Religion, Cultural conflict, Bureaucracy, Hindutva

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Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* was published particularly when Indian writing in English was gaining a lot of attention and the 'Hindutva' was struggling to reclaim its identity. This struggle for reclaiming identity provoked communal riots all over the country resulting into a senseless killing. The political and religious flavor is created with superb skill in the novel. The novel expresses the anguish of isolation and the social milieu of Indian society. It is set on the background of Hindu-Muslim cultural conflict that led to the demolition of Babri Masjid. Religious hatred is the book's central theme. The cultural conflict between Hindu and Muslim is the decisive creation of the British in colonial India to weaken the nation's strength by sowing the seeds of communalism between Hindus and Muslims. But the after-effects of the colonialism had been seen in the postcolonial era after India's independence. With the Hindutva Brigade's passion for India as a country of Hindu, makes them sharpen their weapons against Muslims resulting into the demolition of Babri Masjid. The novel also focuses on the East-West counter through the characters of Rudyard Hart, Katherine Hart and through the paper-cuttings of American newspapers.

*Riot: A Novel* is a love story. But it is set on the political background of Babri Masjid demolition in 1992. The theme of political protest pervades through the novel. India suffered a

major setback, on 6<sup>th</sup> December 1992 when Babri Masjid was demolished by Hindu fundamentalists. The very integrity of the nation was threatened. The guiding principles of the Indian constitution were violated, a place of worship was desecrated and handfuls of Hindu fundamentalists assumed the role of dictators. The novel tries to provide political strategies used on the part of Hindu fundamentalists and politicians aiming at communalism between two communities – Hindu and Muslim. In the novel, Tharoor has discussed political issues with racial and global outlook, with all its statistical figures and incidents of the past. On the occasion of the launching of the novel, Tharoor says –

We are prisoners of constructions that we have made in our mind. Sometimes we are prisoners of real or perceived social and political pressures, sometimes we are prisoners of visions of the past, of future.<sup>1</sup>

Group hatred makes people forget the individual and demonize the whole collectives. Jealousy and bitterness of revenge in collectivity creates a communal hatred and such atmosphere is skillfully used by the politicians to achieve their political aim. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is an intellectual, well-crafted and emotionally charged novel. The book owes the historical event of love-hate relationship of two major communities (Hindu and Muslim) of India. Geeta M. Patil Says about the time of publication of the novel :

India was witnessing growing communalism in politics and also its consequences. Moreover, this novel is also concerned about the increasing rift between the Hindu and Muslim communities. While writing novel as history, Shashi Tharoor plays the role of investigative journalist. Tharoor cuts out a pathetic figure of motherland, which is experiencing a struggle of reclaiming an identity, on the contrary the world is heading towards globalization.<sup>2</sup>

Priscilla Hart is a volunteer working with the non-governmental association HELP-US. Through her views, Tharoor highlights the social conditions of India. The plight, oppression, suppression and atrocities on women in India are focused through the voices of Priscilla Hart, Katherine Hart and Kadambari. The sad plight and social disparity among Indians are expressed through the words of Katherine thus:

And everywhere, people: half-dressed beggars with open sores clamouring for money, ash-smearing sadhus in saffron waist-cloths and matted hair, men in dhotis and men in pants and men in kurta-pajamas, and most strikingly the women, in multicolored saris of cotton and nylon, glittering with golden bangles and silver anklets. (p. 96)

The inability on the part of Priscilla to create awareness in the society is seen in case of Fatima Bi who had aborted her eighth child. Katherine Hart gets a glimpse of stark reality on the status of women in Indian society. When she comes across Sundari, Kadambari's sister, less than 19 lying like a mummy, moaning with every breathe, for she has burns over 75%, the words come to her mouth:

... the whole female chamber of horrors in this overcrowded and desperately

poor country. (p. 246)

Priscilla Hart has devoted herself to the national cause of population control awareness among the women in Zailgrah District in Uttar Pradesh. She learns from the District Magistrate V.Lakshman who manages riots in many parts of the country, about India's age old Hindu-Muslim enmity since Partition (1947). The Hindu militants steered up the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation believing that the Mughal emperor Babar destroyed the temple of Ram at Ayodhya in 1526 and the Babri Masjid was erected on that spot. The Hindus wanted to reverse history and construct the temple on the disputed site. Ram Charan Gupta reports the historical fact that the Ram Shila Pujan programme started on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1989. After partition, almost all the Muslim devotees in Ayodhya had left for Pakistan. Neither the atheists in power nor the law allowed the Hindus to rebuild the temple. His anger is seen in his expression:

Muslims praying to Mecca on the very spot where our divine Lord Ram was born! (p. 52)

The BJP and its militant Hindutva allies and the volunteers in Zailgarh, therefore, decided to bring consecrated bricks bearing the name of Ram which would be transported to Ayodhya to build the Ram Temple. The saffron-dressed Hindus all over the nation contributed to this holy task as an indication of their rage against the Muslims loyal to Islam. Mr. Gupta, the saffronized politician, criticized Jawaharlal Nehru for granting the Muslim the personal law and religious freedom. Tharoor does not spare the Congress Party government and Mrs. Gandhi who made the young Hindus the victim of vasectomy during the Emergency. Furthermore, in the trial of the Shah Banu case, the Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi, in spite of upholding the Indian constitution's directive principle of a common civil code for all Indians, supported the Muslims' Woman Act. In fact, it was politically opportunistic move to appease the most obscuranist Muslim leaders.

The saffron-leader Ram Charan Gupta refers to the Vishwa Hindu Parishad, the Bajrang Dal, the Shiv Sena, and the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh as the 'Sangh Pariwar' and quotes Sadhvi Rithambhara who preaches:

Muslims are like a lemon squirted into the cream of India. They turn it sour. We have to remove the lemon, cut it up into little pieces, squeeze out the pips and throw them away. (p. 57)

It seems to be unrealistic hidden agenda of the Sangh Parivar in the name of Hindusim. The history of Islam shows that the Muslims are fanatics and cruel terrorists. Tharoor is right in pointing out that the Muslim rule only consists of 'dictatorship, monarchies, tyrannies, military regimes' and does not believe in the democracy. In the nations in the Middle East, Indonesia and the Philippines, the Muslims fight only against non-Muslims and not with their kinds.

On the eve of Friday the twenty-ninth, the holy day of Muslims, the Hindu volunteers were busy in preparing for the grand procession, but the two Muslim motor-cyclists with burqas stabbed two Hindu boys – Amit Kumar and Arup with daggers and disappeared in the darkness. The District Magistrate and the SP of Zailgarh called an urgent meeting of the leaders of RSS,

VHP and the Bajrang Dal to promote peace but in vain. The Hindus remained firm on the issues of finding out the perpetrators. Ram Charan Gupta reveals the Hindu psyche and says:

Our blood will irrigate the dusty soil, our sweat will mix the cement instead of water, but we will build the temple. (p. 124)

The communal strain was so intensified that ‘the national mind was afflicted with the intellectual cancer of thinking of us and them’. Several aggressive Hindu men bearing bricks in the name of Ram threw chauvinist slogans at the Muslims like acid such as pointed out by Gurinder Singh:

‘Musalman ke do hi sthaan/Pakistan ya Kabristan’ – ‘There are only two places for a Muslim, Pakistan or the cemetery’... ‘Jo kahta hai Ali Ali/ Uski ma ko choddo gali gali’ – ‘He who calls out to Ali, fuck his mother in every alley’.... ‘Jis Hindu ka khoon na khaule / khoon nahin hai pani hai’ – ‘The Hindu whose blood doesn’t boil has water in his veins.’ Or ‘Jo Janmabhoomi ke kaam na aaye/ Woh bekaar jawaani hai.’ – ‘He who does not work for the Janmabhoomi is a useless youth’.... ‘Mandir wahin banayenge.’ – ‘The temple will be built right there’. (p. 128)

Tharoor fictionalizes the happening in Zailgarh. The Hindu procession swarmed like bees with trishuls and dagger through the Muslim quarters. The Muslims cracked the bombs on the mob claiming the lives of six Muslims and one Hindu in Zailgarh. Several hundred Indians were killed in the sectarian violence in North India along with the loss and Janmabhoomi agitation. Killing, burning, and looting was a common phenomenon followed by, as V.Lakshman tells, “carnage, deaths, arson and finally curfew” (p. 73) in the communally hypersensitive riot-prone area. Forty seven people were injured and one hundred and six were arrested. Four more mosques were desecrated and everywhere there were rumours about the riots. In fact, the Hindus “want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge”. (p. 147)

There were eight deaths in total – six Muslims, one Hindu and the American Priscilla Hart– in Zailgarh riot. It is the general phenomenon at the time of any riot in which rioters are never punished as criminals. On the other hand, the political interference defames the Indian judiciary system. In his interview with the American Journalist Randy Diggs of the New York Journal, the superintendent of police reveals that when the ten Hindu non-criminals were arrested, the lady member of the state legislative assembly Maheshwari Devi with her supporters cried for injustice. This shows the communal rift between Hindus and Muslims. Even, the Chief Minister phoned to the District Magistrate about this outrage. It is a climax that the criminals were released from the jail with petty charges like the violation of a curfew order. They were fined only rupees fifty each. But when they were arrested on the insistence of Lakshman, the session court released them on bail. The political interference in petty matters is, indeed, a mockery of the Indian Penal Code.

Professor Mohammed Sarwar, a Muslim historian traces out the history of Ayodhya and the Ram cult and says:

The fact is that the Ram Janmabhoomi agitation is profoundly anti-historical. The bigots who spearhead it want to reinvent the past to suit the aspirations for the present. (p. 183)

Ram Charan Gupta, the Hindu protagonist, with his Hindu ideologies, makes familiar with intense zeal of Hindutva. He constantly reminds the Hindus about the invasion and destruction caused by Muslim rulers, so as to provoke the Hindus against Muslims. Mohammad Sarwar expresses the Muslim views. The freedom struggle of India asserts the feeling of Indianness which leads in terms of national entity. It was devoid of the imaging of the formation of Pakistan. But along with freedom came the partitions, which shattered the national entity. The entire Muslim community is held responsible for this. But Mohammad Sarwar makes a strong defense. He considers that his community was not responsible for partition. He unfolds the reality behind this two-nation theory:

.... Muslims didn't partition the country — the British did, the Muslim League did, and the Congress Party did. (p. 111)

This statement unfolds the reality of hypocrisy on the part of political leaders. Mohammad Sarwar, though he is Muslim, is a true representative of Indians. Today also we see upheavals in the politics due to communal bias created mainly by political leaders to meet their own motives.

Shah Banu case is one of the instances which focus on the political perspective of the novel. Through the conversation of Ram Charan Gupta to Randy Diggs and the transcript of Randy Diggs' interview with Professor Mohammed Sarwar, we come to know about the hypocrisy of Indian politics to adopt the policy to capture the votes of minorities in the election. A Muslim man wanted to get rid of his seventy five year old wife and it was easy for Muslims. But Shah Banu went to the court saying how she could live on alimony of forty rupees. The court upheld her claim, awarded her a fair alimony every month and reminded the government that the Constitution's directive principles call for the establishment of a common civil code for all Indians. There was a large outcry from Muslims against the decision. But the most of the educated Indian Muslims were in favour of this code. Mohammed Sarwar is one of the muslims among them. Through his five years term as a prime minister, Rajiv Gandhi had faltered in most of his initiatives. This created the greatest problem for him and he was advised by the congressmen to adopt towards the demands of various religious communities and their sundry anxieties. In Shah Banu case, Rajiv Gandhi made a cardinal mistake. He got directly involved in the controversy over the role of the state in regulating the personal law of religious minorities. Rajiv Gandhi, concerned about losing the Muslim support, decided to enact the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act of 1986. In this way, the Supreme Court's decision to enact a uniform civil code had remained a dead letter. This controversy sparked off a huge political uproar.

Rudyard, with his wife, Katherine Hart, revisits India after a span of 12 years to overcome the grief over their daughter's violent death. Rudyard had first come to India to revive the sale of Coca-Cola in the year 1977, when the country was still in the state of emergency proclaimed by Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Rudyard exposes the emergency and



post-emergency era. He arrived in India at the time when the Indian Government was making all the right noises about opening up the economy to economy to foreign investment. He thought that with a new strategy he could definitely increase the sale of coca-cola. His colleague Kisan Mehta makes him aware of a new law that had been passed – FERA (Foreign Exchange Regulation Act) - which governs the activities of the companies involved in international trade. Under the provisions of this law, foreign companies doing business in India have to get their registration, reapproved. This is just another bureaucratic requirement in a country obsessed with forms and procedure. While their case was pending, an anti-Coke wave emerged in the country. In a bizarre attack, Coke was accused of ‘looting the country’ and ‘destroying the health of Indians’. George Fernandes opposed it vehemently for he thought clean drinking water is more essential than Coke. Mrs. Gandhi declared election and was defeated. In a coalition government George Fernandes, was the Minister for Industry. Coca-Cola Company was asked to release its secret formula to the authorities as the price for its business in India. When Coke refused, their long pending application under the tedious 29<sup>th</sup> provision of FERA was rejected and they were asked to quit India. Thus, the political controversies in the government system are highlighted in the novel.

V.Lakshman, the District Magistrate and Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police assert bureaucratic limitations due to political interference. The murder mystery of Priscilla Hart is left unresolved. Lakshman blames it on communal passion. The embassy considers this as a coincidence and states that she must have been ‘in the wrong place at the wrong time’. Through Randy Diggs’, South Asia correspondent of the New York Journal, discussion with Lakshman and Gurinder Singh, the bureaucratic limitations are exposed. It is very surprising to see how the police force behaves in handling these riots. Mohammad Sarwar, in his meeting with Lakshman, realistically remarks:

What kind of country are we creating when the police response to a riot simply sows the seeds of the next one? (p. 258)

Lakshman considers this communal frenzy as an assault on the political value of secular India. His discourse with Diggs exposes the duplicity of the state government. V. Lakshman is not ready to accept his job as a passport to power, privilege, and clout and lifetime security. He stands apart, a bit different from a majority of IAS officers who are there for the service of self and not for serving the country. V.Lakshman is disturbed by the corruption, the political interference and the everlasting threat of their transfer. He is idealistic in his views towards profession. Gurinder, in a discussion with Randy Diggs, gives a realistic picture of Indira Gandhi’s assassination and the consequent riots targeting the Sikh community. The next Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi justifies whatever had happened by saying that “when a mighty tree falls, the earth shakes.” (p.196) All those things disturbed Gurinder a lot and he expressed his anger about political administration:

I felt that all my training, all my faith in the country and its bloody institutions, had been futile. (p. 196)

A Superintendent of Police, Gurinder considers his department as the last bastion of civility and order and whole heartedly accepts the corruption, reality and inefficiency assailing the

profession. Along with Lakshman, he finds himself helpless for he could not control the raging behind corpses and ruins. He narrates the post-riot scenario to the local MLA with his supporters pressurizing him to release the arrested members of his community. Even his department, by framing the weakest of charges, prepares the ground for the release of the culprits. Lakshman and Gurinder Singh find themselves helpless in a frenzy where everything is senseless, proving both ideas and actions useless. With the help of these two characters and their interaction with Randy Diggs, Tharoor explores and exposes the bureaucratic limitations and contradictions and helplessness prevailing in the departments.

One factor that really keeps us stick to the book is the presentation of Priscilla-Lakshman relationship. It highlights contrasting features of two cultures — Western and Eastern, Occident and Orient. They represent the attitudes of two different cultures towards love, sex, and marriage in concrete terms. When Lakshman asks Priscilla: — “These guys you went out with, did you sleep with them?” (p.82), evokes a casual response from her. — “Some of them”, (p.83) replied Priscilla without any sense of guilt and shame. Further, she says, — “Lucky, I’m twenty four.... You didn’t expect me to be a virgin, did you?” (p.83) But in India it is considered to be a sin, if a girl establishes any relation with a man before her marriage. He 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. (p.13)

Gita, Lakshman’s wife presents the virginity and virtuosity of an Indian woman. Lakshman tells Priscilla: —

Of course she was a virgin. Forget sex, she hadn’t kissed a boy, she hadn’t even held hands with one. That’s how it is in India. That’s what’s expected. (p.83)

Similarly, he explains the nature, significance, and sanctity of marriage in Indian context: —

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. (p.103)

The conflict between Lakshman and Priscilla is the conflict between the Victorian ideals of duty, responsibility and respectability, and the Romantic credo of freedom, love and individual fulfillment. Or to put it in another way, it is the conflict between the East and the West. It is the Westernized image of Lakshman that appeals to Priscilla who talks, writes, reads, thinks in a way she does. Their love develops against all odds. It is through their regular meet at Kotli on every Tuesday and Saturday they create their own world, which can be a reality for an American girl but proves to be an illusion to an Indian man. This love rather than providing pleasure creates fear, tension, and insecurity. Stuck in a loveless marriage but deeply attached to his young daughter, Lakshman vacillates between sacrificing his career and family for Hart and giving up the only woman who has ever truly made him happy. It is Rekha, Lakshman’s daughter, who holds her father from forsaking his family. The name Rekha, which means a line, symbolically becomes a line of control. When Priscilla urges Lakshman to leave his family

and accompany her to America, he is caught in the role of Indian culture and identity. He writes:

... How can I explain to her that I'm not even sure I have the right to do that to Geetha, to abdicate my husbandhood? I didn't choose to start my marriage in the first place; how can I choose to end it? My role as a husband and father is central to who I am; it concerns my rootedness in the world; it is inextricably bound up with my sense of my place in the cosmos. I have been brought up to believe that such things – marriage, family – are beyond individual will, that they transcend an individual's freedom of action. Priscilla'll never understand that. (p. 201-202)

Thus, as a man who gives a lot of importance to family responsibilities and filial obligations, he is already equipped with a moral armour against adultery. Priscilla has a more immediately personal and less simple attitude to adultery. What she carries with her is not the practical consequences of a broken marriage but the intensely emotional disgust of a daughter who could never forgive her father for his ugly affair with Nandini his secretary. It is heavily ironic that Lakshman finds himself in a situation, which is emotionally satisfying but morally repulsive, and Priscilla finds herself entangled with a man who in conceding to her wishes will be re-enacting the ugly drama of her father's.

In America, marriage is a bond between two lovers but in India, marriage is an arrangement between families, one of the means for perpetuating the social order. There are other details about Indian ways of life that give a multidimensional picture of India as something exotic to the foreign readers and observers. Priscilla Hart wrote to her friend Cindy Valeriani about some aspects of Indian social life that she considers striking and strange. These aspects of Indian social life make her consider India — so complex a land. She feels that women in India do not enjoy a respectable position. They are considered to be secondary and are marginalized- a plaything in the hands of their husbands, protectors or lord beings. Fatima Bi is caught in the cruel clutches of Ali Mohammad. He tortures and beats her regularly. She is mother of seven children and leading a very poor and miserable life, still Ali forces her to give birth to his eighth child. Perhaps it shows poor people in India believe that children will contribute to family income and share the burden and responsibilities. He clearly tells Priscilla — I decide how my wife conducts her life. Pointing out the deplorable condition of Indian women in her poem entitled Christmas in Zalilgarh, Priscilla writes:

They go back to their little huts,  
Roll out the chapattis for dinner,  
Pour the children drink of sewer water,  
Serve their men first, eat what is left,  
If they are lucky, and then submit unprotected  
To the heaving thrusts of their protectors. (p.15)

Indians are superstitious. A typical Hindu believes in myths, stars and astrology. Geeta, Lakshman's wife is an emblematic representative of such types of people. She is very religious as well as superstitious. When she comes to know that her husband has decided to move away with Priscilla to USA, she goes to swamiji in the temple of Lord Shiva. She prays, undergoes



fasts and seeks blessings from divine world to save her relationship. She asks swamiji to conduct a special pooja for her to help her keep her husband. She says: —

... Use tantra, do the tandva, use anyone and anything you want, swamiji, but please don't let this foreign devil-woman run away with my husband... (p.227)

Much like the myriad voices shouting in a riot, the novel offers perspectives of many characters, from Hart's mother to Lakshman's wife and daughter. However, quite unlike the chaos of a riot, these voices coalesce to solve the mystery of Hart's murder — and, in Tharoorian fashion, there's a stunning twist at the end.

To conclude *Riot: A Novel* is a book of great political complexity. In *Riot*, Tharoor seeks to examine some of the most vital issues of Indian political, religious, cultural and social values of the present days. Tharoor is at the best in portraying the situation and the history of unrest existing between two religions and a love story of cross-cultural beings in the novel. His main focus is to broaden the understanding of Indian culture and historical heritage in the postcolonial era. Thus, *Riot: A Novel* directly and indirectly points out the inefficacy of the political system and the religious and cultural conflict.

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