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## **A Self-reflexive, Dialogic and Metafictional Approach to History and Identity in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot***

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### **Abstract**

*Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* exemplifies postmodernist historiographic metafiction which considers the problematized relation between facts and fiction and highlights the ideologically constructed nature of history. The novel also deftly uses Bakhtin's concepts of polyphony, heteroglossia and dialogic to bring out the essential plurality and multiplicity of human words and actions. Set amidst the Babri masjid-Ramjanmabhoomi agitation the novel addresses issues like East-West encounter, religious fanaticism, political corruption as well as human love and betrayal. My paper would attempt to examine how Tharoor through a non-linear plot and self-reflexive narrative, critiques conventional historiography and replaces any totalizing or absolute History with many conflicting and intertwining microhistories and questions the verity and fixity of any objective truth.*

***Key Words: historiographic metafiction, postmodernism, dialogic, riot, non-linear***

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The term *postmodernism*, when used in fiction, should, by analogy, best be reserved to describe fiction that is at once metafictional and historical in its echoes of the texts and contexts of the past. In order to distinguish this paradoxical beast from traditional historical fiction, I would like to label it "*historiographic metafiction*." (Hutcheon, 1989: 3)

Linda Hutcheon's famous coinage 'historiographic metafiction' marks a specifically postmodernist approach in the art of fiction which distinctly differentiates it from the realist as well as the modernist fiction. Whereas the realist fiction was essentially mimetic in its attempts to hold a mirror up to nature which seemed to be a repository of truth, the modernists shifted their focus to the deep recesses of human consciousness to find order and meaning in an utterly chaotic world. In both cases, fiction is alienated from reality to present itself either a representation of reality or an independent art form. Postmodernism confronts this elitist isolationism with its inclusive nature which weaves history and literature together to produce a combined, autonomous, self-referential signifying system of culture. Postmodernist metafictional writing is both a response and a contribution to the baffling realization that the historical period we are living through has been irreparably fragmented, insecure, self-questioning and culturally pluralistic. Patricia Waugh's oft-quoted definition of 'metafiction' neatly sums up the features of this kind of writing:

Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also

explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh, 1984: 2)

This metafictional self-reflexivity situates a work of fiction within a dynamic historical discourse. Since 1970s we witness the worldwide emergence of a host of writers like John Fowles, Margaret Atwood, Peter Ackroyd, Angela Carter, Graham Swift, Thomas Pynchon, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Kazuo Ishiguro and Michael Ondaatje, to name a few, whose experimental narrative forms and innovative treatments of historical events exemplify the concept of postmodernist metafiction and redefine the interrelation between history and fiction. Since 1980s Indian fiction in English also underwent a radical change in form and matter. The publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981 is generally considered to be a highly significant phenomenon in the firmament of Indian English fiction. The contemporary novelists of this post-Rushdian era which includes the names of Amitav Ghosh, Vikram Chandra, Allan Sealy, Sashi Deshpande, Githa Hariharan, Vikram Seth, Mukul Kesavan, Upamanyu Chatterjee, Shashi Tharoor, Ashwin Sanghi, Aravind Adiga and others are seen constantly interrogating the role and function of history and mythology in shaping the political, cultural and ideological dimensions of a postcolonial nation and its subjects. To be more precise, these new novelists seek to challenge and restructure the processes of historiography and mythmaking in their attempts to define the complex, fragmented and pluralistic nature of collective as well as individual identity in postmodern time and space.

Shashi Tharoor is undoubtedly one of the major exponents in Indian English fiction whose unconventional narrative modes and experimental use of the tropes of myth and history in fiction, broadly characterizes the postmodern perspectives in life and literature. His *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a cult postmodernist text which uses India's mythology and political history interchangeably and in this process deconstructs both to negate any kind of logocentrism. *Riot* (2001) is another seminal work of Tharoor which explores an issue, central to both new historicism and postmodernism—fictionality of history and historicity of fiction and impossibility of any absolute truth. Set amidst a communal riot in 1989 following the Babri *masjid*–*Ramjanmabhoomi* agitation which results in the death of an evidently innocent outsider—a young American student volunteering in a women's health programme, the novel addresses a wide array of controversial issues like East–West encounter, multiculturalism, religious fundamentalism, political corruption, discrimination based on caste, race or gender which deeply problematize the predicament of a so-called independent, secular, democratic and sovereign country. But what makes *Riot* a more fascinating read is the way Tharoor transcends generic boundaries through a non-linear, anachronistic plot structure and consciously cross-referential and discursive narrative mode. Defying all kinds of dominant or authoritative stance, Tharoor's novel closely follows Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia, polyphony and dialogic in which the narrative turns into an endless chain of communication where every voice or argument is countered by a different or opposite one.

*Riot* distinctly falls into the category of postmodernist historiographic metafiction which stands apart from the classical historical novels of Walter Scott and others in its way of inserting historical events and characters within the fictional framework. While in earlier historical novels, the writers were always conscious of avoiding anachronism and preserving the sanctity of 'official' historical records and let imagination sprout mostly on the dark areas of history, these postmodern history–novels boldly transgress the generic and ontological boundaries between the historical and the fictional and therefore cause what Brian McHale terms as 'ontological scandal' (McHale 85). To quote McHale, "postmodern fiction, by contrast, seeks to foreground this seam [...] by visibly contradicting the public record of 'official' history; by flaunting anachronism; and by integrating history and the fantastic" (McHale 90). *Riot* also confronts the so-called official history with

multiplicity, contradictions, fabrications and parodies inherent in any historical discourse. Tharoor adds an *Afterword* and an *Acknowledgement* to the Penguin edition of his novel from where we get to know the real life characters and incidents which propelled him to write this novel. The plot of the novel is based on two real events. Firstly, a riot occurred in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, as reported to him by his friend and IAS officer Harsh Mander. Secondly the death of Amy Biehl, an American scholar who was killed in racial disturbances in South Africa. Besides, Tharoor also mentions,

The research by “Professor Mohammed Sarwar” on Ghazi Miyan is based on the actual work of Professor Shahid Amin of Delhi University... The efforts of “Rudyard Kipling” on behalf of Coca-Cola in India were in fact undertaken by Ketan Mehta. (Tharoor, 271)

But these nominal, spatial and temporal alteration of facts are so intricately juxtaposed with references to so many real events *Ram Sila Pujan*, the Emergency, Operation Bluestar, Coca Cola controversy and persons like Nehru, Maulana Azad, Md Currim Chagla, Indira Gandhi, George Fernandes, Sadhvi Rithambara, that it gives birth to a shared collective aesthetic and cultural code which defies any generic boundary between history and fiction by highlighting the porous nature of the boundary itself.

The very opening sentence of the novel, which reads a newspaper report, “A rioting mob attacked and killed an American woman in a town east of New Delhi yesterday, a few days before she was to return home, the U. S. embassy announced” (2), marks an event with the potential of being loaded with multiple political, cultural and historical meanings and possibilities. It evokes a series of questions. Who killed Priscilla Hart? What she was doing in a seemingly infamous Indian town amidst a Hindu-Muslim communal riot? Was she merely an outsider innocently falling victim in a distant land? Had her American identity anything to do with her death? As the narrative unfolds and moves back and forth in its attempt to fathom the truth behind the mystery surrounding Priscilla’s death, the reader finds himself clueless in a daze of conflicting and contradictory accounts of a bunch of characters. At the end of the novel, we find the U. S. embassy spokesman arriving at the naïve conclusion which rather sounds inconclusive “that she was simply in the wrong place at the wrong time.” (267) the novel comes to an end with the comment of Mr. Lakshman, the district administrator of Zalilgarh:

Mr. Lakshman, however, questions whether there is such a thing as the wrong place, or the wrong time. “We are where we are at the only time we have”, he said. “Perhaps it’s where we’re meant to be”. (267)

Lakshman’s words remind the reader of Priscilla’s observation regarding the impossibility of their relation earlier in the novel— “...I’ve simply found M. Right in the wrong place at the wrong time” (69), or perhaps provides an answer to that. Thus, foregrounding the relativity and arbitrariness of time and place, the two pillars of history, the novel refutes the claim of objectivity and permanence of any ‘historical’ truth and presents the idea of impossibility of knowing the truth which is basic to any historiographic metafiction.

What is very unique in *Riot* is that to establish history and fiction as human constructs, it foregrounds the very process of construction itself. It is a kind of mutilated statue. What we find in the pages of *Riot* is a non-linear sequence of newspaper reports, diary excerpts, letters, telegrams, interviews, scrapbook entries which might have been used and organised by a writer to give them the form of a well-made plot. Tharoor deliberately leaves this process undone and makes the pretension of offering a writer’s source materials directly to the reader to present the idea that in a given circumstance, everyone can build a history or fiction on his or her own. Another thing that appropriately strikes the keynote of the novel is the different attitudes and reactions a particular

event elicits from different quarters. While Priscilla's death gets a prolonged, elaborate coverage in American newspapers which portray her as a martyr, died in a godforsaken land and sends a reporter to make a story on her death, the Indian media's reaction to the event was mostly muted and nonchalant as Randy Diggs reports,

Not much press interest here, If they're lucky, they'll get an inch or two in one of the Delhi papers. Zailgarh is too far, the riots yesterday's story... one more death doesn't make that much of a difference in a land of so many deaths. (11)

What differentiate history from chronicle is the story elements. An event can never be exactly represented as it happens in a particular time and space which cannot be reversed. History is not exactly what has happened. It is, rather, what is said to have happened. This act of reporting essentially involves narrativity and subjectivity. And when thus the authenticity and objectivity of history are jettisoned, the idea of 'emplotment' comes to the fore which underlines the role of the historian in selecting or rejecting stories according to his personal choice and shaping them in appropriate structure for ordering events into a meaningful and complete story, camouflaged under the term 'history' as Hayden White observes in his essay *The Historical Text as Literary Artifact*:

the events are made into a story by the suppression or subordination of certain of them and the highlighting of others, by characterization, motific repetition, variation of tone and point of view, alternative descriptive strategies, and the like—in short, all of the techniques that we would normally expect to find in the emplotment of a novel or a play. (White, 223)

The voice of Professor Mohammed Sarwar echoes the similar perception of history while commenting on the *Ramjanmabhoomi* agitation in *Riot* :

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)

Sarwar's words which acts as a metacommentary in the narrative also comes very close to Foucault's notion of history as a plurality of discourses. Historical facts can only exist as discursive entities, as imposed narrative processes. Discourse is the context in which historical or any kind of knowledge is produced. A dominant discourse sanctions and legitimizes knowledge and in this process subjugates and marginalizes other discourses. Sarwar points out how 'history' is being manipulated and fabricated:

The Hindutva brigade is trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs, dredging up "evidence" of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory (67)

But *Riot* follows Bakhtin's idea of 'dialogic' which allows conflicting voices to exist simultaneously in a polyphonic novel and considers the text to be a site of struggle. Thus we find Sarwar's views on history to be countered by those of the Hindu Chauvinist, Ram Charan Gupta who interprets history following the Hindutva ideology of Veer Savarkar to secure his political gain:

But these Muslims are evil people...They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they are all descended from conquerors from Arabia or Persia or Samarkand (54)

This dialogic aspect of the novel is also evident in the arguments and counterarguments of Rudyard, the American business executive and Priscilla's father who worked as the marketing director of Coca-Cola India and the Indian politicians regarding the approval of Coca-Cola to do business in India as the Indian Parliament had passed FERA, the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1973. While

Rudyard wonders, "It seemed faintly absurd to us in Atlanta or elsewhere in the world that Coke should have become an object of political controversy at all." (31), the socialist politician George Fernandes raises the question during a parliamentary session: "What kind of country is India, where you can get coke in the cities but no clean drinking water in the villages?" (31)

Priscilla–Lakshman relationship which runs parallel with the political and communal tensions, adds another dimension to the novel as it lays bare the complex, conflicting and multilayered nature of the relationship between the Eastern and Western worldviews. Zalilgarh, which is India in miniature, is quite realistically, no different in Priscilla's eyes than it appears to other Western characters in the novel. She prides herself to a lady with a lamp in a country with dirt, squalor, superstitions and all kinds of evils. But Lakshman, she writes, with his Western education, sophisticated, gentle disposition, Wildean aphorisms, "has nothing in common intellectually with any of them"(20). For Lakshman, on the other hand, Priscilla is a fresh and fragrant air of freedom, an angel with irresistible and magnetic charm, a distant, exotic American dream which he long secretly fostered within himself. Love blossoms helplessly, almost inevitably between them and they involve in a secret, intensely passionate and sexual tryst in a haunted mansion, named *kotli*, every Tuesday and Saturday. Their individual identities merge with the collective or national ones in Lakshman's ironic speculation:

Tomorrow, though it's a Tuesday, I won't be seeing Priscilla, because it's a public holiday: Independence Day. The day we threw off the yoke of the white man. The day I will be reminded, painfully, of my dependence on a white woman (188)

Their relationship shifts the conflict inwards as Lakshman's psyche is torn apart by opposite pulls of love and honour, dream and responsibility, revolution and resignation. Nanda Kumar in an article *Multiplicity of Voices in the novels of ShashiTharoor* observes,

...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.

Another metafictional trope that Tharoor employs quite successfully in *Riot* is 'self-referentiality' which is also to be distinctly found in other postmodernist metafictional works like Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's own masterpiece *The Great Indian Novel*. Lakshman ponders on writing a novel:

That gets us onto my own writing – my erratic, disorganized, unfocused writing... "I'd like to write a novel," I tell her, "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." (135)

And this is exactly what Tharoor does in *Riot*—writing differently. Lakshman's words also echo those of Ved Vyas in *The Great Indian Novel*:

...for every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of India I know, with its biases selections, omissions, distortions all mine.... Every Indian must forever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. (Tharoor, 1989, p. 373)

To conclude, it can be said that the novel's title *Riot* appropriately encapsulates the thematic as well as stylistic concern of the novel. The very word 'riot' refers to a conflict. A conflict is always there, erupting in violence outside and within, in human encounters and in the clash of discourses.

Riot happens both in semantic and syntactic level deferring unendingly the meaning or truth and in this process brings out the narrativistic, relativistic and metafictional nature of history.

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