

The Grammar of Conflicts in *Riot*

- Amrendra K Sharma and Manju Roy

Shashi Tharoor's works normally resound with rhetoric of multiple socio-cultural affairs. *Riot* is also not an exception to the rule. In fact, *Riot* "confirms Shashi Tharoor as a major voice in contemporary literature." Some of the great reviewers appreciate its concern with the multiple kinds of social, political & cultural affairs in varying degrees. Shobori Ganguli finds it touching 'a rather raw nerve of contemporary Indian Politics.' Adam Goodheart considers it as 'a basic parable of the modern world, with its random human encounters, clashes of cultures and garbles international communiqués.'

There are reviewers, like Renuka Narayan who has not been able to digest these collisions and so sensed it as 'a dark elegy to India.' I believe she has taken only the negative side of conflicts and collisions. She has failed to appreciate that it is not democracy which is at fault but the way we practice it. The appalling quality of our leadership may be a matter of concern to us, but the solutions to the flaws of democracy also lie in democracy itself not outside democracy.

Shashi Tharoor himself has confessed in many of his interviews that the novel is full of collisions of various sorts- personal, political, emotional and violent. This major voice has tried to solve different kinds of global problems as a senior official of the UN for more than two decades. Besides, he has searched the way-out of pacifying communalism and violence plaguing Indian awareness to a great extent. Naturally, this novel discusses various types of conflicts between individuals, between cultures, between ideologies and between religions. This article aims to answer some really interesting questions with regard to these conflicts:

- i. Is ***Riot*** really riotous in terms of multiplicity of conflicts?
- ii. Do all the conflicts contribute significantly to the development of the plot of the novel?
- iii. Is it not imperative for the west to tread carefully and understand the host (Indian) culture before barging in with its ideas?
- iv. Should India's multiple identities be considered the main cause of hatred between communities?
- v. Do many clashes and conflicts occur as a result of contending narratives? Are these narratives often based on recapitulations of history?
- vi. Is gossip more potent than truth in Indian culture? Can it cause even a great disaster?

Just to have a better appreciation of different types of conflicts, we may go to the plot of the novel. The novel centres on Priscilla Hart. She is a 24 year-old American volunteer working in association with 'Help-Us.' She is involved in developing awareness among women about population control. However, she does not find anything changing as women are still so submissive that they cannot raise a question even for their welfare rather they submit to the demand of their men folk and accept any number of pregnancies happily. So, this is a great conflict, which is difficult to resolve for Priscilla. She herself acknowledges that her task is not so easy but at the same time it is difficult because religion, age-old traditions and the male's ego intervene in getting her objective achieved. Further, she also accepts that these women folk are so talented, so knowing, yet so weak to stand up against their tradition and society in limiting their family and thus providing their children a quality life and preserving their health too. She tries to win their confidence by persuading them to stop undesirable children but she has to pay a price for this by suffering the wrath of Fatima Bi's husband who calls her a foreigner and threatens to kill her as she is thought to be responsible for the abortion of Fatima Bi's eighth child. She feels confused as to why they are after her life when she is trying to uplift their condition by showing the real art of living with dignity and happiness. This comes up as a great conflict in any developing nation where no one is ready to take into account another's perspective, where no one wants to change, where no one wants to stand and ask questions regarding their better future.

The American version of the novel has been labeled "A Love Story." This is really a sensual but ill-fated romance between Priscilla Hart, the American heroine, a 24 year old family planning counselor and V Lakshman (nicknamed Lucky), an older married government official positioned as the district Magistrate.

This relationship brings to surface several kinds of conflicts, like the conflict between the existential need and social expectations. Lakshman, though deeply in love with Priscilla Hart, refuses to go with her, as he does not want to lose his social image, his job and his daughter. Though every cell of his wants to be with this American lady, he does not want to lose social prestige and reputation just to feed his emotions. Besides, it also exposes the traditional Indian social fabric that does not allow a lady to fight against her husband.

Further, the relationship between Indian civil servant and the American researcher leads to the perennial conflicts between the Oriental values and the Western perception of truth. The officer who talks sense, and who thinks alike attracts her. But again the strange point of this relation, according to Patil (2007:82), is that here love does not provide long-term pleasure, rather it brings fear, insecurities, tension, confusion and uncertainty. Lots of things that have been taken as a sinful act, like

extramarital affairs in Indian culture, does not even raise an eyebrow in the Western culture.

On occasions, Priscilla has been shown to question the very foundation of the traditional Indian marriage system where the elders of the family arrange the marriage. She is unable to swallow this marriage as the lifetime commitment between a boy and a girl.

On a close scrutiny, we come to know that his affair with the American lady paints a conflict between his being and nothingness. His whole being cries for this woman so much that he is unable to remain away from her even for a week. He just thinks of an alternative life where he will not suffer the loveless life he has suffered for nine years with his wife, Geetha. Priscilla, for him is a '... fantasy come true, the possibility of an alternate life' (p.155).

This also brings to the surface some of the so-called social taboos, like sex for discussion in a very bold way as sex also plays a very vital role in bringing this civil servant closer to the foreign researcher. Geetha has a different attitude towards sex. She just takes it as a routine chore where she does not want to initiate or welcome it in any way; she just wants to remain a passive partner. Patil (2007:83) also feels that she is born to endure it rather than enjoy it. On the other hand, Priscilla enjoys every moment of it as sex is a great festivity and celebration for her. All these bring Lakshman closer to her but ultimately his social face wins over his personal and existential faces and he decides to end the relationship, as he has to look after the family, especially his daughter Rekha.

In addition, Priscilla is always lost because of his double standards and feels that perhaps it is a part of Indian culture. She finds even Holy Scripture supporting her point. On 16 July 1989, she writes in her scrapbook:

Learned something interesting about the Hindu god, Ram the one all fuss is about these days. Seems that when he bought his wife back from Lanka and became king, the gossips in the kingdom were whispering that after so many months in Ravan's captivity, she could not possibly be chaste anymore. So to stop the tongues wagging, he subjugated her to agni-pariksha, a public ordeal by fire, to prove her innocent. She walked through unscathed. A certified pure woman. (p. 63)

She further continues:

That stopped the gossip for a while, but before long the old rumours surfaced again. It was beginning to affect Ram's credibility as king. So, he spoke to her about it. What could she do? She willed the earth to open up, literally and swallowed her. That was the end of the gossip. Ram lost the woman he had warred

to win back ... What the hell does this say about India? ... Loyalty is all one way from the woman to the man. And when society stacks up all the odds against a woman, she'd better not count on the man's support. She has no way out than to end her own life. (p. 63)

She is full of regret for having an affair with the civil servant for this very reason: 'And I am in love with an Indian. I must be crazy.' (p. 63). These remarks speak volumes about women's status in India even towards the end of 20th century.

Connected to the conflict of standards in Indian society is the conflict between the scientific facts and public opinion. She is shocked to find that even now ordinary people believe that a lady is responsible for the birth of a girl or a boy not the gentleman. Besides, her value is, normally, decided by the fact if she has been able to deliver a male child in the family. Priscilla brings forward Sundari's case. Sundari is rebuked often by her mother-in-law: 'what use this woman who ... cannot produce a son.' Implicitly, a girl child is a curse and a boy is considered, more often, a boon. Sundari, who is brought to hospital with 75% burns and in her feeble voice, narrates the circumstances leading to the severe burns. She could not bring the expected dowry from her parents. Besides, she is accused of carrying a female child in her womb. So the result is that her own husband and mother-in-law set her on fire. Through, Sundari, Tharoor experiences the trauma and pangs of the evil of dowry. Kadambri calls it our major concern:

That is the real issue, for women in India. Not population control, but violence against women, in our own homes. (p. 249)

Patil (2007:100) sounds right in saying that 'his (Tharoor's) writing records a seismograph of pressures and tremors that our society is facing at the moment.'

Next, Tharoor highlights a conflict between the promotion of multinational companies and our age-old consciousness. Rudyard, Priscilla's father, is always surprised to know that where people keep on facing infinite problems, how members of parliament get sufficient time to attack Coca-Cola.

This novel also exposes an ongoing conflict between so called idealism and realism in the life of civil servants. Lakshman knows that a riot is nothing but just as 'an assault on the political value of secular India.' However, he finds himself helpless to control the situation because of the government's wrong policy.

As *Riot* is a product of increasing communalism, so it is always concerned about the growing gap between the two communities –the Hindu and the Muslim. In the novel Ram Charan Gupta represents the

Hindu ideology but Moh'd Sarwar articulates the Muslim one. Lakshman and Gurinder have been shown being neutral and always dancing as puppets in the hands of politicians.

Moh'd Sarwar, the historian, is shocked at the controversy arising out of Ramjanambhoomi – Babri Masjid issue. He prefers to quote Maulana Abdul Kalam to vent the sentiments of Muslims and to assert that India belongs to them as much as she belongs to Hindus:

I am part of that indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. (p. 108)

Moh'd Sarwar goes back to the history of freedom struggle and highlights two different images of Muslims in pre-independence and post – independence India. Muslims were considered a great force to end the British regime in India but as soon as India was made a free country, we witnessed a partition of the whole country into two parts and somewhere deep down our hearts, Muslims are held responsible for this partition. He holds a very clear view that ‘... Muslims did not partition the country, the British did, the Muslim league did, and the Congress party did.’ (p. 111) Now with the discriminating attitude towards Muslims, he is shattered and lost:

...where do Indian Muslims like me fit in? I have spent my life thinking of myself as a part of ‘us,’ now they are Indians, respectable Indians, Indians winning votes, who say that I am really ‘them.’ (p. 114)

However, the world is known for having varieties of people with different perspectives. Tharoor considers India as ‘an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, poly-confessional, country with five major resources of division – language, region, castes and sub-castes, class, and religion.’ Though, himself a practicing Hindu, he does not subscribe to Gupta’s points of view in constructing a temple with bricks and cement, rather he advocates building a temple in people’s hearts. Instead of having faith in religious dogma, he subscribes to Hindu creed, a set of beliefs which nurture humanity and help them in blooming fully and having its all round development. Besides, he champions diversity and openness instead of living in an isolated world. He is sore with Gupta’s Hindu zeal as well as Moh'd Sarwar’s aggressive defense of Muslims. He feels shocked to note than when the whole world is crying for globalization, India is still plagued with identity crisis.

Returning to the issue of having different perspectives, one can refer to Gupta who is highly disturbed because of pampering one community at the cost of another and giving so many special privileges to the Muslim community on various occasions while Hindus are deprived of such privileges in the garb of their majority (population).

In short, we may say that Tharoor is really an expert in bringing out the various conflicts successfully. In his interview with Harvard International Review in 2002, he blames our history for most of these conflicts:

Many clashes and conflicts occur as a result of contending narratives, and these narratives are often based on recapitulations of history, in some cases, contrived to make a point for its contemporary relevance and often not in a constructive way. So, yes, history can be misused.

To illustrate, even some Americans may be obsessed with history and some Indians also look to the future as well. But that juxtaposition, for Tharoor, may be a necessity to make a really larger and important point. However, he does not believe only in highlighting the conflicts but also tries to implicitly suggest pluralism and openness for the healthy growth of our society.

Riot portrays different types of conflict - of people, attitudes, philosophies, religions, loves and hatreds. Therefore, it was difficult to have just one point of view and naturally, a multitude of narrators was needed to have, presumably, different points of view. Some examples will make this idea clear. Ram Charan Gupta is an extremist firebrand Hindu who feels that even the Taj Mahal is actually a Hindu temple. Prof Sarwar believes in India's pluralism but, by no means, he is a representative of the majority of Muslim opinion.

In addition, the theme of juxtaposition, used by narrators, also lends greatness to the novel. This fact has also been confirmed by Tharoor in his interview with Renuka Narayan (for *The Express Magazine*, 26 Aug 2001). To put it differently, in the novel, a national narrative has been sharply contrasted with the narrative of individual love and loss. This brings it closer to the category of the great novels, like *Anna Karenina*, of the world.

Tharoor keeps on repeating that given the enormous challenges of India's ethnic, religious and linguistic diversities, only an all-inclusive pluralism will guarantee the survival and success of the Indian nation. Quite recently in an article, 'The Indic Civilization,' *Weekend: Khaleej Times* (15-21 February, 2008) Shashi Tharoor has highlighted the importance of an all-inclusive pluralism:

Isn't Indian Civilization today an evolved hybrid, that draws as much from the influence of Islam, Christianity and Sikhism, not to mention two centuries of British Colonial rule? Can we speak of Indian culture today without qawwali, the poetry of Ghalib, or for that matter the game of cricket, our de-facto national sport?

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Dr. Amrendra K Sharma

Asst. Professor of Linguistics
Dhofar University
Salalah, Sultanate of Oman

Dr. Manju Roy

Senior Lecturer
Dept. of English
C.M.College
Darbhanga - 846004