

## POSTMODERN FICTIONAL TECHNIQUES IN POSTCOLONIAL INDIAN CONTEXT: A CULTURAL CRITIQUE OF SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE RIOT*

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**Abstract:** This paper aims at analyzing the postmodern fictional techniques like metafictional historiography, disjointed narration, mixing the high and the low and self-reflexivity by situating postmodern narratology within the postcolonial Indian Context in Shashi Tharoor's *The Riot*. The novel begins from the New York Journal's fictional account of Hindu-Muslim riot at Zalilgarh, Uttar Pradesh in 1989, and transcends space and time through mixing politics and personal lives through multiple narrative techniques. The death of a 24 year old Priscilla Hart, a volunteer of a non governmental organization from the United States is the central action of the story. The reasons for death of the innocent foreigner in India remain a mystery throughout the novel. The novel analyzes the different versions of truths behind the killing of Priscilla Hart through plural, non-linear, postmodern narratology.

**Keywords:** Metafictional historiography, postmodern narratology, postcolonial context, Multiple narrative techniques.

### INTRODUCTION

The author, Shashi Tharoor, builds this postmodern novel like a crime thriller by maintaining the elements of suspense throughout the novel. The exotic postmodern narrative technique of mixing the high and the low has found its place in the novel. Love is mixed with law and sex with duty. It is a tale of love, lust, and politics. The personal life of Priscilla Hart mixes with the Hindu-Muslim politics. The readers engage in futile attempts to guess the reasons for the death of Priscilla Hart. Who killed Priscilla Hart? How did she die? Where did she die? These questions haunt the readers throughout the book and remain unanswered till the end. The book begins with the New York journal entry and ends with the same journal entry. Based on the real riot at Khargone, Madhya Pradesh, the author fuses historical details with fictional elements to create a historiographical metafiction.

The milieu shifts from the present to the past by creating multiple points of views through journals, newspaper reports, scrap book entries, diary entries, interviews and personal letters. The chief characters in the novel narrate the story from different point of views. The prejudice of each character influences the narratology. The building of the Ram temple at Ayodha becomes the backdrop to the story. Religious fanatics and secular historians engage in different narrative modes to retell different versions of truths to the readers. Hindu fundamentalists use mythological elements from the past like the birth place of Rama, the episode of kidnapping Sita, the death

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of Ravana and testing the chastity of Sita to recreate a distorted reality in order to suit their ideology. Ram Charan Gupta, a Hindu leader, weaves *The Ramaya* myth to recreate the political Hindutva narrative in order to build the Ram temple. His arguments are countered in the light of history by a Muslim historian, Professor Mohammed Sarwar. The author succeeds in blending his version of religious myths and political history to create an engaging metafictional historiographical novel.

The novel begins with the New York Journal's news paper report of the Hindu-Muslim riot at Zalogarh, UP, India. Journalist Diggs reports the unexpected death of Priscilla Hart during the riot and sends a shock wave in the global sphere. The exact reason for the death is not reported in the beginning of the novel. Priscilla Hart involves in educating the uneducated Indian women of their sexual and reproductive rights. She focuses mainly on women's health and well being. Her personal and true feelings are registered in her scrap book. Slowly, while engaging in activities related to women rights, she falls deeply in love with the district magistrate of Zalogarh, V. Lakshman. Depressed with his marital relationship with his wife Geetha, V. Lakshman reciprocates his love for Priscilla Hart. Both of them secretly meet near a ruined palace, Katla after sun down and exchange their love. Priscilla vaguely mentions about her relationship with the person of high social rank in her scrapbook and occasionally sends her greetings to her beloved confidante, Cindy Valeriani. V. Lakshman, an alumnus of St. Stephen's college, Delhi, shares his personal relationship only with his close friend and Superintendent of Police, Gurinder Singh who also is the alumnus of the same institution where V. Lakshman studied.

The tragedy shatters the peace of Rudyard Hart's family. Rudyard travels along with his divorced wife to India to know the exact reasons for his daughter's death. Years ago, he worked as a promoter of Coco-cola in India and failed to correctly market his product. His name Rudyard bears resemblance to the colonial novelist Rudyard Kipling who misrepresented India as a land of jungle to the West. Symbolically, Rudyard Hart represents the role of the neo-colonial agent who wants to exploit the Indian economy in the era of globalization. His affair with his own secretary results in his divorce with his wife Katherine and separates him with his own daughter, Priscilla. Haunted by the memory of her own father making love to his secretary, Priscilla hates him for betraying her mother and reveals her hatred towards him to Lakshman. Priscilla's family traveled to Zalogarh to investigate the case.

### **Versions of Truths in the Postmodern Era**

V. Lakshman and Gurinder Singh, agents of law and order, do not reveal the love affair of Priscilla Hart to her parents. Though the magistrate is deeply involved in the erotic relationship with Priscilla, the truth remains hidden in the novel. Lies are mixed with truth to create different versions of truths. In his personal interview with

Diggs, and Catherine Hart, Lakshman remains very objective and detached about the case. In reality, the truth behind the relationship does not appear in the lime light. Lakshman himself reaffirms his disbelief in one single truth or one perspective to life. He disregards the old version of story telling giving hints to the readers that the plot revolves around different versions of truths and multiple realities. Lakshman says "The truth! The singular thing about truth, my dear, is that you can only speak of it in the plural. Doesn't your understanding of the truth depend on how you approach it?" (Tharoor 137). Parallel to this idea of creating multiple realities, the reasons for the death of the central character are predicted through different stories. From Lakshman's journal, Lakshman's intention of narrating postmodern stories emerges as an alternative to linear stories. He reveals his penchant for writing a postmodern novel that does not resemble like a conventional novel. Here, the novel turns self reflexive by giving hints to the readers that the narratives are not real but constructed. Evidently, Lakshman wants to construct a postmodern novel which challenges realist narratology. Hutchen defines a postmodern work of art as: "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 3)

Moreover, Lakshman expects the novel to resemble an encyclopedia that can be read according to the interest of the readers. Priscilla is surprised to know Lakshman's interest in writing innovative fiction that transcends space and time. She questions the beginning and the end of such works. Lakshman responds that it is the duty of the readers to explore the truth. This chapter also gives hints to the readers that there is going to be multiple truths in the murder case of Priscilla Hart. In a postmodern novel, the readers are expected to be co-creators of meanings to understand the underpinnings of the plot construction of the *Riot*. The author seems to be in tune with Bran Nicol's definition of postmodern fiction: "What postmodern fiction does repeatedly is prevent us from passively entering the fictional world by constantly reminding us that it is a fictional world, that fictional worlds are complex, and that the way authors deal with fictional worlds might teach us something about the real world". (Nicol 39)

### **A Cultural Critique on Indian Sensibilities**

The magistrate and the superintendent encounter many versions of truths from different sources. One version is that Priscilla was killed by a group of angry Muslims in a ruined building; another version is that she accidentally stepped on country-made bombs. Besides these speculations: Was Priscilla stabbed by Ali Mohammad, the husband of Fatima Bi, a Muslim woman who aborted her eighth

child listening to Priscilla's advice on reproductive rights? Was the hand of the Hindu leader involved in the crime when Kadambari, assistant of Priscilla revealed the secret relationship to the Hindu fanatic? Did the fanatic orchestrate the murder of Priscilla by covering it behind the riot? Lakshman remains a powerless, silent spectator, unable to avert the death of his secret lady love despite knowing the ominous place and inauspicious time of their final meeting. Multiplicity of meanings succeeds in engaging the postmodern readers. Paras Dhir opines:

“Riot marks the emergence of a new perspective vis-à-vis fictional in its clear diversion from being a reflection of social reality. Instead of giving expression to some already existing reality or worldview the novel develops into a kind of discursive formation of ideas and an expression of divergent views forming specific relations to historical events. Hence the historical events as well as the fictional happenings depicted in the novel offers multiplicity of perspectives and provide different versions of historical as well as the fictional truth” (34)

The riot covers the death of the innocent American at Zaligarh by erasing the evidence behind the crime. Gurinder Singh, the superintendent covers the only evidence that bears witness to the truth by hiding the personal scarp book of Priscilla Hart and saves Lakshman from further investigation. Another strong evidence for the case which remains hidden from the investigators is the postmortem report of Priscilla's pregnancy during her death. The novel ends ironically with the death of the woman who stood for the reproductive rights of women. The silence behind the death of Priscilla depicts the unresolved crimes against women. The date and time of the riot matters a lot for the understanding of the novel because the novel begins with the report of the death on the 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 1989 in New York Journal and ends with the special report of Diggs on 16<sup>th</sup> October, 1989. It seems to be deliberate on part of Tharoor that 2<sup>nd</sup> October the date of birth of Mahatma Gandhi happens to be the date of death of Priscilla Hart. This is symbolic of how Gandhi's message of peace seems to have lost its influence over the people of the nation. The news about the riot is published on 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> of October 1989 in the late editions of New York journal highlighting the gruesome death of Priscilla Hart. Subsequently, the news is sensationalized with different headlines like, “Americian slain in India, An American Death in India, Death of an idealist”. Randy Diggs, one of the American reporters of the news, begins to explore the mystery behind the murder. He travels to India along with the parents of the deceased and interviews Ram Charan Gupta, V. Lakshman, Gurinder Singh, Rudyard Hart, and Professor Mohammed Sarwar to understand the reasons behind the riot and to unravel the mystery behind the death of the American. Randy Diggs tries to dig the case deeper to solve the case.

Randy Diggs interviews Ram Charan Gupta on October 12<sup>th</sup>, 1989 to investigate the reasons behind the riot. Ram Charan affirms his faith in Lord Rama as he

worships him everyday for his bravery, honesty and nobility. According to him, Lord Ram was born thousands of years ago in the treat-yuga period according to the Hindu calendar. During his time, many temples were dedicated to Lord Rama and the place of his birth was known as the Ram Janmabhoomi. A magnificent temple was consecrated to mark the exact birth place of his divine birth. However the temple was destroyed by the Mughal emperor, Babar and a mosque was erected on the Ram Janmabhoomi. In his view, the sanctity of the place was polluted by the Muslims

Later, after several centuries, an idol of Lord Ram emerged in the exact spot where the Hindu temple was destroyed and it was considered a divine act of Lord Rama. Ram Charan expresses his disbelief in the Indian judicial system to resolve the conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims. For him, the Indian judicial system is a colonial system which fails to understand the religious feelings of the Hindu. To the surprise of Diggs, he proposes to rebuild the temple in order to fulfill the dreams of millions of Hindus across India. As an ardent supporter of hindutva ideology, he extends his support during the sila pooja. He explains the pooja in his own words, "Bricks bearing the name of Ram, each brick consecrated in a special pooja, worshipped in its local shrine, and brought to Ayodha. This was the Ram Sila poojan, the veneration of the bricks of Ram" (Tharoor 53). The people of Zalogarh also joined hands with the rest in taking steps to conduct the Ram sila pooja. Though it was not a big city, a special procession was organized on the 30<sup>th</sup> September for the smooth conduct of the special pooja.

Ram Charan registers his grudges against Islam and Muslims by accusing them as evil foreigners who fail to show their loyalty to India. In spite of enjoying the benefits like government subsidy, reservation and tour concession to Mecca, the Muslims in India support Pakistan. Their marital laws are so different that it promotes polygamy in India. He also mentions the steady increase in population of Muslims since partition from 10 percentage to 15 percentage. According to him the population of Muslims will outnumber the Hindus in the future. He questions the rights of women in the Muslim community by criticizing the divorce of Shah Banu. The secular ideas of Nehru and Rajiv Gandhi are condemned by him as the secular ideas support the Muslims and not Hindus. Besides condemning their religious beliefs, he criticizes the political system followed in Muslim countries. Tharoor deliberately highlights through the character of Ram Charan, how cultural nationalists in India have their own critique on Nehruvian secularism that the first Prime Minister opted for after gaining Independence from the British.

According to Ram Charan, on 29<sup>th</sup> September, two Muslims arrived in motorbikes and attacked the volunteers of Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Bajrang with daggers. This was the reason for the violence and it was started by the Muslims. As a result Amit and Arup Singh were severely wounded and admitted in the Zalogarh

hospital. The vengeance of Ram Charan is revealed in his own statement:” There was blackness in our hearts that night. Mr. Diggs. These Muslims could not be allowed to get away with this. We knew what they wanted-to stop our procession the next day. To thwart our Ram Sila poojan program. To prevent in the end, the rebuilding of the Ram Janmabhoomi temple itself” (Tharoor 59). The following day Ram Charan was interrogated by the district magistrate and the superintendent of police about the incident. Rules were laid to stop such violence in the future. The procession route was changed because the volunteers planned to carry sacred bricks through the Muslim streets. According to Ram Charan, these were the main reasons for the eruption of the riots.

The same day, Diggs interviews Professor Mohammed Sarwar to register his views on religious fundamentalism. From the transcript of Diggs, the readers hear the voice of a secular Muslim who condemns religious intolerance. The professor refers to Maulana Azad’s speech when he became the president of the Indian National Congress in 1940 and praises him for his love for the nation. According to him, Maulana Azad was a better Muslim compared to Mohammed Ali Jinnah who did not follow the principles of Islam.

He was proud of being a Muslim in India because the Muslim rulers brought “the message of human equality” (108). Though Azad discouraged the idea of partition, his views were condemned by Jinnah. Finally, As far as the partition is concerned, the real follower of Islam could not convince Jinnah. As a result Jinnah won, and Azad lost.

Likewise the professor made a list of genuine followers of Islam who stood by India during the Partition and the Bangladesh war of 1971. Regarding the partition, the professor opines” Muslims didn’t partition the country- the British did, the Muslim League did, and the Congress party did. There are more Muslims in India today than Pakistan” (Tharoor 111). He recollects his personal experience in the classroom when his love for the nation was challenged by students. He counters the questions posed by Ram Charan on a specific case related to the divorce of Shah Banu and women’s rights in Islam by dismissing it as political. He further questions the false projection of Ram Charan on the population of Muslims in India and alarms about the dangers of fundamentalism in India. In his words:” The danger is that Hindus like Ram Charan Gupta will get Muslims like me thinking differently” (Tharoor 115) He concludes the interview by affirming his faith in the secular India which values the religious sentiments of both the Muslims and the Hindus.

### **Situating Postmodern Narratology within the Postcolonial Context**

On 12<sup>th</sup> October 1989, the views of both the people are narrated from Diggs’s interview with them. Diggs registers the ideas of both the personalities. From Randy Diggs notebook, written on October 12<sup>th</sup>, the readers understand the physical features of

Professor Mohammed Sarwar and Ram Charan and their respective motives towards religion and politics. As a metafictional historiography, the relation between reality and fiction has been problematized throughout the novel. Religious myths are fused with politics in order to create fictionalized versions of histories. Patricia Waugh highlights the relation between reality and fiction in her definition of metafiction as: "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" (Waugh 2).

The following day, on 13th October, Diggs interviews the Magistrate, V. Lakshman. Their conversations are recorded like those in a professional interview and it is divided into three parts. In the beginning, Diggs describes the untimely death of Priscilla Hart in the riot as the death of a woman in the wrong place at the wrong time. Listening to the questions about Priscilla, Lakshman remains tight lipped throughout the interview by not revealing his relationship with Priscilla Hart. Later, the interview deals much with politics. According to Lashman, the riot started with the announcement of Ram Sila Pooja by the BJP on 15<sup>th</sup> September. The news hits Zaligarh, and sends a shock wave to Muslims. When Diggs inquires about the security and protection during the procession, Lakshman reveals the inability of police force to control thousands of emotionally charged Hindutuva volunteers. To the surprise of Diggs, Zaligarh was already declared as "communally sensitive" area but the government was not prepared to curb violence.

Lakshman's friendship with Gurinder Singh is also revealed during the interview. In the second part, Lakshman describes the exact place of protest and violence and how a curfew was immediately imposed after the outbreak of violence at Zaligarh. He reports about a Muslim victim known to him as Mitha Mohammed with the nick name sweet Mohammed. Only with the help of the tough Gurinder Singh, he was able to curb the violence in the Muslim locality. The exact number of deaths was 8 including Priscilla Hart. The third part of the interview is different because the Harts, the parents of Priscilla join the interview along with Lakshman. Here, the magistrate lies to the Harts by concealing his intimate relationship to Priscilla. By expressing his doubts at the motto "Truth alone triumphs", Lakshman reaffirms his skepticism about the notion of one single truth. He says "Truth alone Triumphs. But sometimes I'm tempted to ask, whose truth? There's not always an easy answer" (Tharoor 236). The tragedy of the tale is that an innocent American, who is no way connected to the religious riot loses her precious life. No one has confessed the murder and there are only speculations about her death at Kotli. Her death gets reported only in the following day. Diggs remains disappointed in the end of the interview for his inability to explore the truth behind the murder. The journalist from the West fails to extract specifics from the Magistrate. Tharoor seems to hint here at cultural differences as the reasons behind the failure of the Westerners in understanding a cultural specific crime in the East.



Finally Randy Diggs interviews Gurinder Singh, the person who was directly involved in the case to solve the mystery on 14<sup>th</sup> October. To keep a track of events, dates are essential to understand the scenario. Diggs begins with the serious of questions regarding the reasons for allowing the procession. Gurinder Singh responds candidly to the all the questions by raising his voice and by using his aggressive body language. According to Gurinder Singh, in order to discourage Hindus from provoking the Muslims, strict rules like not carrying a cymbal or *tirusul* near the Muslim area. Hindus were advised not to raise anti- Muslim slogans during the procession. However the rules were broken during the procession. Diggs connects Ram charan Gupta's version of truth regarding the cause for the violence and probes the issue deeper. Dr. Mohammad points out the multiple voices in the novel by borrowing Mikhail Bakhtin's definition of polyphonic novel to dissect this postmodern art. According to Dr. Mohammad:

“The plurality of India's cultures is an important aspect of the novel that adds meaning to the polyphonic nature of the novel. The dialogues among the different voices on the culture of India present a kind of analogy that one can adopt to understand the pluralistic Indian society. As a polyphonic novel requires the participation of all the cultural voices, Tharoor has very successfully presented a contrast between the culture of the East and the West, a contrast between the Orient and the Occident.” (287)

Gurinder Singh acknowledges the fact that the American journalist has systematically analyzed the case, and assures to provide more facts relevant to the case. The violence starts exactly near The Mohammed Ali Mosque, a communally sensitive Muslim area. As a precautionary measure, both the district magistrate and the superintendent of police gathered near the site to arrest the trouble makers. Unfortunately, a group of Muslims threw county made bombs known as “*soothli bombs*” at the Hindu crowd. This incident snowballed into a full scale riot. When the procession went out of his hands, Gurinder Singh ordered for a shoot at sight command to bring the situation under control. The angry agitators were controlled for a short time due to the police firing. Risking their lives, the magistrate and the police superintendent, tried every way to control the lawlessness. In the words of Gurinder Singh, “In riots, all sorts of things happen. People strike first and ask questions later. It's tough to be a cop in a riot” (Tharoor 173). The death of a Muslim boy named Sweet Mohammed aggravated the Muslims further. Diggs presents a complete picture of the death of Sweet Mohammed by questioning both the magistrate and the superintendent. The recurring theme of riots involving a certain cultural ideology pushing people to their limits is what Tharoor maintains here as well.

On further police enquiry, the names of politicians in power emerge to the lime light. The interview ends with Gurinder Singh's narrative of the Operation



Blue star and the Anti-Sikh riot in 1984 after the assassination of Indira Ghandi, the former Prime Minister of India, by her own Sikh bodyguards. When Randy Diggs questions about Priscilla Hart, Gurinder does not reveal the secret which is known only to him. The truth behind the pregnancy of Priscilla remains undisclosed. More is known about the riot, but less about the murder of Priscilla Hart. Her death remains a mystery.

Finally, Katharine Hart, mother of Priscilla, interviews Lakshman on the 14th October, 1989 to understand the causes behind the mystery of her daughter's death. She straightly asks whether she was in love with him during her stay at Zaligargh. Lakshman squarely refuses to accept the truth. The reason why she went on the particular day to the secluded site remains a puzzle to Katherine Hart. Though she seems to believe in the dirty hand of the magistrate in the crime, there are no evidences to prove it. The only evidence is the personal scrapbook of Priscilla but it was missing from the crime scene. Later, Katherine investigates the case further by questioning the police superintendent about the missing scrap book. Like Randy Diggs, Katherine Hart also fails to expose the truth. According to Dhir: "One factor that really keeps us glued 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". (40)

The real truth is revealed on Sep 30th, 1989 when Ram Charan Gupta interacts with Makhan Singh regarding the secret affair of the magistrate with the American woman. In order to take revenge against Lakshman, he sends Makhan Singh to the secluded spot to expose the scandal. When Makhan Singh finds Priscilla to be alone in the secluded spot, he takes his revenge. Yet it is not clear who really killed Priscilla? There are always multiple versions of truths.

## CONCLUSION

The personal narrative of Priscilla Hart and Lakshman bear witness to the fact that they were engaged in a serious love affair. However, the author mixes the poems and romantic tale of lovers with the serious interviews of Randy Diggs to create this postmodern narrative. The truths in personal narratives are mixed with the lies in political narratives to create a hybrid mix of the high and the low. The concept of "Truth alone triumphs" is challenged by postmodern narratology that offers different versions of truths. Quite befitting a post modern novel, realism is challenged by disjointed narrative techniques. As in a postmodern novel, there is no one grand narrative in the fiction. Through small narratives the truths are narrated from different points of view. The postmodern narratives in the novels are so elusive that they transcend time by challenging linear narratives in fiction. Shashi Tharoor mixes the American characters like Priscilla Hart, Rudyard Hart, Katherine Hart

and Randy Diggs with the Indian characters like Lakshman, Gurinder Singh, Ram Charan Gupta, Professor Mohammed Sarwar in order to create a hybrid postcolonial Indian reality. In this postmodern novel, the global characters encounter with the local Indian characters to explore the truth. The author experiments by situating postmodern narratology within the postcolonial reality by locating the Indian characters with the American characters to create hybrid realities.

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