

Communal Violence and Politics in Riot

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ABSTRACT

Communal violence surfaced with its full vigor after the independence. It continued even after partition. Political power, manipulated minds, domination and religious fanaticism are root causes of communal violence. The objective of the paper is to explore the political and religious tensions in the novel Riot. The novel explains communal passion and religious politics as the major kinds of violence in the society. It reflects the importance of one's life. This paper will address to repose communal violence.

Keywords: *Religious fanaticism, Communal violence, Domestic violence, Politics, Revenge, Riot.*

Introduction

The pages of our history carry numerous traces of riots, protests and social movements because violence became the foundation for most of the incidents. The post independent India encountered various marks of communal violence as its sequel. Postmodern writers reflect the events that took place in history which changed the minds of people and the structure of society. Similar to many Postmodern writers, Shashi Tharoor portrays the miserable truth of coercion in his novels. His novel Riot depicts communal clashes that happened in India during the Babri Masjid destruction. The novel reflects many contemporary social and political issues. The main theme of the novel is the religious clash between Hindu and Muslim

fundamentalists. The novel carries significant motifs such as gender, political, religious violence, multiculturalism, etc., which are pivotal to communal violence.

Tharoor's novel is a great reflection of postmodern element. While referring to Tharoor's work, Ghosh says "Tharoor's novels are amalgamation of myths, history, culture, and different ways of narrative and postmodern techniques. His novels entertain and at the same time educate the readers about the dark realities of contemporary India- the diversity of pluralistic Indian society, the pains, pleasure, aspirations, dilemmas, cultural and political realities of postcolonial India" (Ghosh, 2015:187). Tharoor also has brought out several issues like sexual abuse, domestic violence, dowry, religious disharmony, cultural violence, fanaticism and illegitimate relationships. The novel focuses on love, friendship, and family.

The novelist portrays Priscilla Hart and Lakshman as the protagonists and kismet as the antagonist. The novel primarily emphasizes the death of an American girl and further investigates the causes which leads to the story. The backdrop of the novel is Babri Masjid demolition, in a fictitious town called Zalilgarh. Religious and gender violence in the novel explains how communal violence is induced into the society. Tharoor presents the voices of victims from the Hindu and Muslim communities, to bring out the unwise personal aids.

Theoretical framework

Violence is caused by social inducement and dominance. It results in disappointment and frustration. It will lead to mob, riots, massacre, and protest. These social movements are the outcome of collective behavior. Encyclopedia Britannica's (2020) Collective Behavior article examines collective behavior theory with sociologists' ideas on mass violation among individuals. It says collective behavior is unpredictable. This article explains how manipulation and influences works in a mob. It also defines how to control such exploited mind with various sociologist's aspects. This article is compiled of major types of collective behavior theory and its fundamental effects. The U.S. sociologist Robert Park, who coined the term collective behavior, defined it as "the behavior of individuals under the influence of an impulse that is common and collective, an impulse, in other words, that is the result of social interaction." He emphasized that participants in crowds, fads, or other forms of collective behavior share an attitude or behave alike, not because of an established rule or the force of authority, and not because as individuals they have the same attitudes, but because of a distinctive group process.

Collective behavior theory is initially used by Franklin Henry Giddings as an expression in 1908. Later, many sociologists used this term to refer social destructions and incidents. The U.S. sociologist Neil J. Smelser's defines this as mobilization on the basis of a belief which redefines social action. Major forms of collective behavior were advanced by Smelser's six social conditions. Those six conditions can vary with the type of collective behavior.

- i. The social structure must be peculiarly conducive to the collective behavior in question;
- ii. A group of people must experience strain;
- iii. A distinctive type of belief must be present to interpret the situation;
- iv. There must be a precipitating event;
- v. The group of people must be mobilized for action on the basis of the belief; and
- vi. There must be an appropriate interaction between the mobilized group and agencies of social control.

Sociologist, Smelser asserts that collective behavior occurs when people desire some change in society which is not attainable through normal institution. Collective behavior is interconnected to communalism as both may directs or leads to communal violence. In short, collective frustration leads to communal violence. Social barriers like age, ethnicity, gender, caste, power and race are the primary reasons for the enormous progress in communal violence. Violence is the significant reason for social barriers and also an absolute example of collective behavior. Communal violence may come under the theory of collective behavior.

Literature Review:

A study on communal violence by B. Jayapushpa (2016) in the novels of Shashi Tharoor and Raj Kamal Jha's *Riot and Fireproof* finds the communal tension and the superior feelings brings out the contradiction between faith and religion. It carries a superior notion that all life matters irrespective of religion, cast and community.

Doyal Ghosh (2018) in "Hybridity and Indian Conflict of Identity in Shashi Tharoor's Novels" specifically focuses on the concepts as the title says of hybridity and Indian conflict of identity in Tharoor's novels namely, *The Great Indian Novel*, *Show Business* and *Riot*. She separately traces the protagonists of each novel and describes the differences of multiculturalism and identity quest. To focus on *Riot*, she briefly examines the cross-cultural couple with contrast history and culture. This paper distinctly studies about post-colonial themes.

Encyclopedia Britannica's (2020) *Collective Behavior* article examines collective behavior theory with sociologists' ideas on mass violation among individuals. It says collective behavior is unpredictable. This article explains how manipulation and biasness influence work in a mob. In addition, it defines the ways to control exploitation of mind with various sociologist's aspects. This article is compiled of major types of collective behavior theory and its fundamental effects.

Klensa Kurien (2014) explained the sociopolitical issues in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. The critical study of the paper focused on death of Pricilla Hart and how her life was before death. It speaks of the contaminated lives of extra marital life and violence in the novel.

Paras Dhir (2009) in "Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*: Perspectives on History, Politics and Culture" critically analyses the deeper side of the novel. Collision of two-religions and a cross- cultural love story is narrated. He discussed all historical issues in the novel

comprehensively. This paper has carried most of the contemporary affairs of political, religious and cultural conflicts between two dominant groups.

Saman Asfaq in *Communalism and the Discourse of Minority Women in Select Indian English Fictions* concentrates on post-colonial fictions to analyze the patriarchal hands against minority women. She referred all the historical events on communal violence and says that the whole incident is the outcome of collective violence. Asfaq represented the condition of minority women in the fictions of female writers.

Methodology

Wikipedia defines qualitative analysis as it relies on data obtained by the researcher from first-hand observation, interviews, questionnaires (on which participants write descriptively), focus groups, participant-observation, recordings made in natural settings, documents, and artifacts. Paul Felix Lazarsfeld, the founder of modern research surveys introduced quantitative and qualitative approaches together in “*Marienthal: The Sociography of an Unemployed Community*” in 1930. The data are generally non-numerical. This method includes ethnography, grounded theory, discourse analysis, and interpretative phenomenological analysis.

This paper follows interpretative approach on collective behavior theory to understand Communal violence in the novel *Riot*. Interpretive approach significantly deals social theories and its views which reflects reality as socially constructed through historical understanding of events.

Discussion

The novel, *Riot* discusses the controversial and contemporary issues of postmodern India. Shashi Tharoor focused every political event which takes place in the fictitious town Zalilgargh. The novel ultimately describes all types of violence. The story mainly revolves around the American girl Priscilla Hart’s mysterious murder. At the end of the novel, readers get to understand the politics, manipulation, brutality and cultural violence which butcher the innocent lives. In *Riot*, Tharoor brings out gender discrimination and violence in society and interprets how harmless lives are butchered in the name of communal violence. All the female characters in the novel face gender, and domestic violence except Priscilla whereas, she encounters cultural violence.

The protagonist of the novel is Priscilla, a 24-year-old American student who joins as a volunteer in HELP-US awareness program. She becomes a friend of District Magistrate as it is easy to communicate with him because of his fluency in English language. Their friendship turned to be a relationship, Priscilla has developed affair with Lakshman and their intimate meetings become frequent. Since Priscilla supports minority women, she was disliked by the people of Zalilgargh. She received threat from a Muslim man for helping his wife about birth control methods. He said, “You tell that American whore that if I ever lay my hands on her,

she won't be catching that plane" (Riot 244). Priscilla has never been accepted by the native people of Zalilgargh for her nationality and her extra marital affair with Lakshman. Dhir's study emphasizes the cultural dominance among the characters in Riot novel. He proposes his view that, "Tharoor has taken pains in doing his best at pointing out the situation and the history of unrest existing between two-religions and a love story of cross- cultural beings. It raises issues beyond the specificities of time, place and culture to illuminate larger questions: Who are we? By what do we define ourselves? What do we hate? Why do we hate? What are we prisoners of? "Each character in the novel", says Tharoor "raises these complicated questions and it is for the reader to find the answers because the questions concern each one of us" (Dhir, 2009:42).

Priscilla was never felt weird for deceiving Lakshman's wife Geetha. She was despised by Geetha for the illegitimate relationship with her husband and she prays like, "don't let this foreign devil-woman run away with my husband" (Riot 227). The Westernized American girl in rural Indian town underwent all kinds of threats and insults from an illiterate Indians but an educated police officer accuses her for her culture. Priscilla is the example of character assassination and a victim of cultural violence in Riot. He criticizes her for her character which is evident from a quote in the text: "she would have been the talk of every male... some hothead might have tried to act as a personal substitute for her vibrator, whether she'd wanted him or not" (Riot 186). Priscilla is the example of character assassination and a victim of cultural violence in Riot.

Priscilla faced cultural violence, other female characters in the novel encountered gender and domestic violence. To highlight the plight of minority women Ashfaq remarks that, "In attempting to draw attention to the complex situation of minority women in the nation, the novels not only focus on the trauma of the survivor-victim but also elucidate the ways in which contemporary communal discourse, either surreptitiously or openly, affects the daily lives of these women thereby capturing the ways in which minority women are virtually excluded from the nation and national discourse" (Ashfaq, 2014:38). Fatima Bi is the mother of seven and also pregnant. When her husband Ali forces her to sleep with him, she refused for which she was severely beaten by her husband. When Priscilla supported birth control pills to Fatima, Ali warned her. He says with proud that, "I decide how my wife conducts her life...not her! and certainly not you!" (Riot160).

As a woman, Fatima felt sexually harassed by her own husband in the name of marriage. Moreover she appeared only as a toy to Ali. The system of marriage has given the liberty to man to misuse the relationship and show dominance to own the wife's body. Similarly, Kadambari a volunteer in HELP-US program, and her sister Sundari witnessed domestic violence and infanticide. Sundari who got married at the young age was tormented in demand of dowry. She was cruelly beaten and her mother-in-law attempted to murder her. Her body partially burned and her child got miscarried. The victim Sundari says with an embarrassment that, "this is the real issue for women in India. Not population control, but

violence against women. In our own homes. What good are all our efforts as long as men have the power to do this to us?" (Riot248).

Tharoor perfectly portrays the conditions of women in patriarchal community. Priscilla's mother Mrs. Katherine Hart has experienced the betrayal from her husband Mr. Hart. He had developed an extra marital affair with his secretary and as a result he was separated from his wife. Mrs. Hart raised her three kids independently as a single mother. Similarly, Geetha, the wife of Lakshman is deceived but she doesn't abandon her husband. Instead she blames the woman for having an affair with Lakshman. Geetha remains as an unsophisticated home maker but Lakshman used her innocence as ignorance. He used to compare his wife with Priscilla. He says, "Geetha lies stiffly, unmoving...how absurd to describe sex with Priscilla with the same words I use for Geetha!" (Riot156). The way a man treats his wife is reflected picture perfect in Riot. Women in India will never feel guilty of their husband's act and Geetha stands as the representative of Indian women. She does pooja after Priscilla's death, to quote from the text: "Here is my offering for a special puja. That's right. For my husband's health, happiness and long life." (Riot264). Every female character in the novel undergoes humiliation, betrayal and pain.

Ram Charan Gupta is a Hindu fundamentalist leader and a religious fanatic in Zailgargh. He is the rampant voice of communal desire. He involves in leading the Ram Sila Poojan procession to support Babri Masjid demolition and against Muslims. The aim of this procession is to influence Hindu fundamentalists and to collect bricks to reconstruct Ram temple. Gupta criticizes Muslims as being responsible for splitting Hindustan. This is evident from what Gupta feels, "Now these Muslims have already divided our country once, to create their accursed Pakistan on the sacred soil of our civilization" (Riot55). He accuses Muslims for the slogans they recite during partition. Gupta recalls those slogan that, "we fought to take Pakistan; we will laugh as we take Hindustan" (Riot 56). So, Gupta wanted to take revenge through the procession and he recited, "Say with pride that we are Hindus" (Riot146). Gupta's thoughts were only bounded with being a Hindu not an Indian. It is proven when he says, "...why should my tax money go to helping Muslims get closer to their foreign god?" (Riot55). Precisely, Gupta is furious on Muslims and vehemently wanted to rebuild the temple so declares that, "No matter how many lives have to be sacrificed to ensure it. Our blood will irrigate the dusty soil, our sweat will mix the cement instead of water, but we will build the temple..." (Riot124). Gupta was ironical in his view, while the god Ram is the symbol of love, peace, humanity and kindness, the Hindu chauvinist wants to slay the lives of sinless beings.

In the novel Riot, the character Professor Mohammed Sarwar is an historian and a Muslim. His conversations and his Urdu poetry references are to edify history. He was a Muslim by religion but Indian by spirit. He supports neither Muslim nor Hindu fundamentalists. Sarwar's opinions carried the answers for Gupta's vengeance. He put forth his argument on unity that even Muslims are the part of Indian nationality. He speaks about the partition that, "Muslims didn't partition the country – the British did, the Muslim league

did, and the congress party did” (Riot111). As an Indian citizen Sarwar claims equal rights so he says, “If the Turks cease to be Muslim, they are still Turks... But if we cease to be Muslim, what are we? We’re Indians!” (Riot115). Through Sarwar, Tharoor wants to convey that as India belongs to Hindu Indians as much as it belongs to Muslim Indians too.

As a historian Mohammed Sarwar claims that there’s no evidence of Ram Janmabhoomi temple in history because the place was occupied by Babar built masjid before its destruction. So, building a Hindu temple at masjid is an agitation and antihistorical crime. He doesn’t want a bigotry violence in cause of building temple so he says that, “If we allow them to do it now, here, they will turn their attentions to something else, and the whole orgy of hate and violence will start again. If they get away with attacking Muslims today, they’ll hit Christians tomorrow. And at a fundamental level, intolerance is the real enemy; intolerance can always shift targets” (Riot 183). Sarwar accuses Shiv Sena party for assaulting Muslims which led Bombay riots in 1993. He voices that, “the Shiv Sena suddenly turned into a Hindu chauvinist party and started denouncing Muslims, a far better target for their brand of homegrown bigotry” (Riot 184). Sarwar is clear that he doesn’t want to discriminate or to oppose any community or a group because he doesn’t want to repeat bloodstained history.

Another character from the novel Riot is Gurinder Singh, the superintendent of police who is the best friend of Lakshman had a grudge over years against the Operation Bluestar and anti-Sikh riots of 1984. He anxiously says that, “Mrs. Gandhi did bugger-all. She was too busy playing politics... Then in 1984, she finally did something...She could have besieged the place, cut off the water supply, prevented food from reaching the terrorists, started them into surrender. But no,” (Riot 191). After Golden Temple vandalization the Sikh community stand against Indira Gandhi who approved Operation Bluestar which was the satisfactory gesture to Gurinder Singh. So, he says, “A whole new bunch of angry Sikhs were recruited by the motherloving thugs as a result of the golden temple tragedy. And a lot of Sikhs vowed revenge on those who had done this, this thing, to their holiest of holies. The prime minister, Mrs. Indira bloody Gandhi, was their primary target.” (Riot 193). He feels proud of the assassination of Indira Gandhi and says, “Sikh honor had been restored.” (Riot 193). The death of Indira Gandhi influenced the Congress party which lead the way to anti-Sikh riot. The political party threw terrible slogans like, “India is Indira and Indira is India”, and “Blood in revenge for blood.” (Riot 193). This riot caused numerous loss to Sikh community and open on to merciless mankind.

In 1984, Gurinder Singh happened to witness the loss of his nephew when he was set ablaze by the fanatics alive inside the car. He immensely devastated for his inability to rescue his nephew and he grieves as “I am haunted by the face of a little ten-year-old boy enveloped in flames, a boy who loved cricket and called me Uncle.” (Riot 198). Later, he wanted to resign his police job as he doesn’t want to be a part of this manipulative political system. He recalls Rajiv Gandhi’s saying that, “When a mighty tree falls, the earth shakes.” (Riot 196) in which he thinks that it was intentionally declared to violate the mob mentality. But after anti-

Sikh riot he made his mind to only serve the nation but not to ignite the communal violence as he says that, "I want to save that boy. I want to save other children like him. I want to put out the fires." (Riot 198). Gurinder learned a lesson out of this riot and promised himself not to repeat revenge which endures only disharmony.

The novel Riot mirrors the true politics behind riots in disguise of religion. The contrast of faith and emotion with history and practice is difficult to understand for religious fundamentalists. So Tharoor, cleverly portrays the contradictory characters Gupta and Sarwar. Kurien states that, "Riot delves deep into the notion that religion is not merely chanting of prayers, performing pujas or worshipping any particular God, in fact it is a way of life. The ultimate aim of all religions is to be a secular human being and cultivate common good" (Kurien, 2014:235).

Conclusion

The novel Riot brings out the seriousness of one's lost life through the death of Pricilla Hart. Tharoor reveals out all the possible violence happening in the family and society. Babri Masjid was one of the historical monuments but after it's demolition it became a sad history. Gupta seeks to take revenge on history but here the novelist gives a shot; to quote from the text: "They want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge." (Riot147). Butchering innocent's lives during the riot is harder than losing a part of land during partition. Jayapushpa, B. concludes that, "No one should be identified by their religion, caste or community. As per the constitution of India, every citizen of India has equal rights. There is no discrimination on the basis of religion. The authors convey that it is crucial for people to really change their mindset regarding religion, caste and community" (Jayapushpa, B. 2016:89).

As responsible citizen the character Mohammed Sarwar educates us about reposing Communal violence through this quote in which he says, "No group of Indians must be allowed to attack another group of Indians because of where they are from, or who they worship, or what language they speak" (Riot 184). Religious, gender and cultural violence don't begin from an individual also don't end within a community because the enormous growth of violence gradually turns as communal violence. We have the history of worst communal outburst and we are living in the modernized world but still people stand to support communal violence. Violence will take up a prominent place, unless people understand the importance of benevolence and one's life. Communal violence never settles down while the people's political party remains as the communal party. Communal violence will disappear when the citizens realize religion is nothing but a faith and belief.

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