



Exploring Gender Inequality and Sexual Politics in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* (2001) offers a profound exploration of gender inequality and sexuality. The novelist uses the milieu of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute to examine the subjugation of women and the clash between Western and traditional Indian attitudes toward sex and marriage. Through the characters like Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer in India and Laxman, the fragmented narrative structure highlights the intersection of personal relationships with larger socio-political forces the communal Indian society. This study also discusses how Tharoor critiques both domestic communal tensions and the influence of Western perspectives on India's internal affairs. The females are often marginalized, controlled, or subject to violence. Through a postmodern narrative, it depicts how they are treated as submissive objects while highlighting the contrast between traditional Indian and Western conceptions of sexuality. It juxtaposes the personal lives of its characters against the backdrop of political and communal upheaval. It highlights how gendered experiences are manipulated and shaped by cultural, social, and political forces. This research paper analyses the issues of gender inequality, sexual politics, and power within the context of communal tension, patriarchal structures, and cross-cultural encounters in contemporary Indian society as represented in the novel. By analysing the characters, relationships and social ethos presented in the narrative, the study seeks to evaluate how Tharoor critiques patriarchal attitudes and reflects the complexities of gender and sexuality within a culturally diverse and conflict-ridden society.

KEY WORDS: Communalism, fanaticism, politics of identity. postmodern approach, fragmented narration

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor is one of the prominent contemporary Indian writers. His novel *Riot: A Novel* (2001) is a captivating and multifaceted exploration of communal violence, cultural interaction, personal relationships, political conflict, and social issues in contemporary India. Through its blends fiction with fragmented narrative structure and diverse storytelling techniques, the novel captures the complexity of truth, memory, and identity. The subjugation of women is shown as a deep-rooted aspect of the



patriarchal Indian. It shows how women are marginalized, treated as "playthings" by males subjected to both domestic and social violence. Women have limited freedom and social judgement regarding their lives and personal choice. The relationship between Lakshman and his wife, Geetha, which is presented as socially certified but personally oppressive. he asserts his authority by stating, "I decide how my wife conducts her life"(p.83).

The character of Sundri, the sister of a local helper named Kadambari, is depicted as a victim of a male-dominated society. She experiences violence within her home, despite being married and bringing a significant dowry. She is described as a "hapless prey of male-dominated society" who faces consistent exploitation, with her husband and mother-in-law exposing her to domestic violence, including nearly burning her to death. Her subjugation is emphasized by the mother-in-law's disregard for her life, viewing her only in terms of reproductive utility: "What use of this woman who does not work around the house and cannot even produce a son" (p. 48).

The women in novel are often forced by traditional roles and superstitious beliefs, making them dependent on external figures for their happiness. Geetha, fearful of losing her husband, seeks help from a Swami, revealing the submissive nature imposed on women:

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

The novel argues that women are distinctively helpless during social and communal riots, highlighting the gendered aspect of violence, where they become dolls in political or personal disputes. Priscilla Hart's character highlights the dangerous position of women's safety, with her death serving as a central point of the story. She notes the desperate condition of local women in her poem, *Christmas in Zalilgarh*: "To the heaving thrusts of their protectors" (p. 15).

Violence against women is exposed both as a direct consequence of communal anarchy and as a systemic, patriarchal issue within Indian society. The novel, set against the backdrop of the Babri Masjid demolition, uses the death of an American social worker, Priscilla Hart, to highlight how women are often victims of fanaticism. It demonstrates that during riots, they become casualties of "wrong place, wrong time" scenarios, often becoming objects of "othering". It suggests that during intense conflict, they are particularly vulnerable and their lives are reduced to mere statistics in a broader political game. The death of Priscilla, is described as: "Not a person. Just another body in someone else's story.". The story highlights how the death of a woman, especially a foreigner working on reproductive health, is overlooked, emphasizing the callousness of the social and political structure.

Tharoor contrasts communal violence with the everyday violence women face within their homes. Through characters like Sundri, the novel highlights the oppression of Indian women.



"Her husband, Rupesh, and mother-in-law regularly beat her. She is called a witch... Her pregnancy is no longer an acceptable excuse for not doing the chores they want her to do."(p.83)

The novel implies that women are "doubly marginalized" and are often treated as targets for war attacks in social-political conflicts. In the aftermath of the riot, the voice of the community is captured in the realization:

"Over two hundred Muslim women and children in a Muslim Mohalla had poured into the streets "there is not a grain of food or a drop of milk in our homes... how long can we let our children starve?"(p.202).

The novel suggests that the voices of female victims are often unheard, the novelist says: "Their lament is mostly unheard and goes unnoticed"(p.15). This quote highlights the irony of "protection" in a male-dominated society, where the supposed protectors are actually the perpetrators of violence against women.

Cultural collision in sexuality is vital to the narrative. It mostly played out through the illegal affair between an American volunteer, Priscilla Hart, and an Indian district magistrate, Lakshman. This relationship acts as a microcosm of the clash between Western liberal attitudes towards sex and traditional Indian notions of morality, duty, and marital sanctity. The novel contrasts her casual, experiential approach to sex with the Indian outlook that it is a sacred, private, and sometimes reproductive act, according to Lakshman's analysis in the text. When asked about her past partners, Priscilla responds without shame: "Some of them" (p. 83), and later says, "Lucky, I'm twenty-four.... You didn't expect me to be a virgin, did you?" (p. 83). He recognizes that Indian women are often expected to be pure. He says,

"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)".

The extramarital affair highlights the tension between Western individualism and Indian collectivism, where marriage is more of a family obligation than a personal choice. He observes that Indian wives often view sex as a duty rather than pleasure:

"Geetha lies stiffly, unmoving as I go about what she sees as my business; she neither initiates nor welcomes, making it clear that she understands her amatory role as being to endure rather than to enjoy (p. 83)".

This creates an incompatible conflict when contrasted with Priscilla's demand for sexual and emotional fulfillment. Lakshman tells her: "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).



Lakshman is conflicted by his attraction to Priscilla and his deep-seated commitment to his traditional Indian identity and marriage to Geetha. He describes his moral conflict regarding his marriage:

“...my marriage, family – are beyond individual will, that they transcend an individual's freedom of action. Priscilla'll never understand that” (p. 201-202).

This highlights that in the Indian context, as depicted in the novel, the social structure outweighs individual desires, making the "collision" not just with her, but with his own cultural conditioning.

The forbidden nature of their relationship is worsened by the setting. Their meetings occur at a "haunted" site, which is described as a place that symbolizes the dangerous collision of forbidden love. Priscilla views India as a place where women are marginalized, while at the same time being a "foreign devil woman" tempting a married man. This impact of love and cultural taboo concludes in her death, which Tharoor portrays as a victim of a larger political "riot," symbolizing that such cultural crossings are viewed as threatening in the Indian context. The novel eventually shows that sexual relationships are heavily influenced by cultural boundaries, and the collision between the West (Priscilla Hart) and the East (Lakshman) through the lens of sexuality, love, and intimacy. The novel suggests that the truth about the relationship—and the woman's life and death—is impossible to know, obscured by the cultural lenses of the observer. The American media views Priscilla as a victim of a "godforsaken land," while local authorities interpret her death through the lens of her "immoral" choices. Through these collisions, Tharoor highlights that the personal, sexual relationships between individuals are rarely free from the broader, often violent, cultural and political identities that surround them. The relationship between the American protagonist, Priscilla Hart, and the Indian District Magistrate, Lakshman, acts as a lens for exploring the stark differences between Western and Eastern perspectives on sex and love. Priscilla approaches sex as a joyous, celebratory experience, while the traditional Indian female perspective (Geetha) is portrayed as one of endurance.

Tharoor, talks the complexities of communal violence in India by explicitly highlighting the themes of silenced voices, fragmented narratives, and the misrepresentation of truth by both internal political forces and external observers. The novel centres on the murder of Priscilla Hart during a Hindu-Muslim riot, uses multiple perspectives to show how truth is obscured and individual lives are deemed collateral damage in political conflicts. She is murdered, and her voice is permanently silenced. Her death makes her a passive victim of a riot she did not understand, highlighting how ordinary lives are overlooked in collective violence. By obscuring the identity of the murderer—who could be a Hindu fanatic, a Muslim extremist, or an unknown participant—Tharoor suggests that in communal conflicts, "truth" is rarely found and often buried by collective memory. The novel portrays the Muslim community's sense of fear and discrimination, highlighting how their perspectives are frequently marginalized during communal violence.



The character of Randy Diggs, an American journalist, and Priscilla's parents, represents external views attempting to understand India. The novel critiques how they often fail to grasp the deeper complexities of Indian society, imposing their own simplified narratives upon a complex, "fragmented" reality. Tharoor shows how politicians and fanatical groups manipulate history and current events to create a "farrago of distortions" to serve their own, often detrimental, political agendas. The novel touches upon how the press and media often fail to provide a complete picture of the situation, leading to the distortion of facts and the deepening of prejudices. The core issue is the breakdown of communication and mutual trust between communities, replaced by ideological rigidity. Instead of giving a clear, linear account of events, he utilizes a fragmented structure to reflect the confusion and ambiguity of a society grappling with riots, which prevents a clear understanding of justice. Ultimately, *Riot* serves as a critique of how narratives are manufactured to silence voices, making it impossible to identify the true perpetrators of violence and leaving victims—like Priscilla—lost in a "confused clamour of hatred". Priscilla Hart's voice is rarely heard directly, allowing her identity to be constructed by others, highlighting the marginalization of women in narratives about political and cultural history.

The theme of love and politics is depicted as a catastrophic collision, where personal intimacy is destroyed by ideological fanaticism. The central love story between Lakshman, a Hindu District Magistrate, and Priscilla Hart, a young American volunteer—is constantly infiltrated by the political climate. The intense political violence acts as a barrier that makes personal love impossible, culminating in her death during the riot. Lakshman tells Priscilla, "There's a lot of tension in these parts over something called the Ram Janmabhoomi... these Hindus want to reverse history and put the temple back where the mosque now stands". Tharoor uses the love story to explore how different perspectives perceive love, sex, and duty. However, these personal interactions are shadowed by the larger political battle over who owns history. Lakshman is representing the educated elite trying to manage the chaos, highlights the futility of using the past to fight the present.

The political atmosphere, dominated by rising Hindu fundamentalism, affects all relationships. Lakshman's own arranged marriage is contrasted with his free-willed, but illicit, passion for Priscilla. The political conflict is reflected in the way characters approach personal relationships, duty, and emotional loyalty. Tharoor suggests that communalism is creating a "second Partition" within the Indian soul, rendering love between different identities taboo. "An India that denies itself to some of us could end up being denied to all of us. This would be a second Partition: and a partition in the Indian soul would be as bad as a partition in the Indian soil".

One of the distinctive features of the novel is use a fragmented narrative structures like interviews, letters, diary entries, journals, news reports to show that both love and political truths are elusive. The intersection of love and politics provoke the reader to see that personal passions are always vulnerable



to the manipulation of collective identity. In essence, Tharoor's *Riot* argues that when politics becomes a "tool of exploitation" that "dismantles the long ages strength of Indian unity," personal love cannot survive. The "riot" of the title refers not just to the communal violence between Hindus and Muslims, but also to the tumultuous, forbidden, and ultimately doomed "love story" between an American woman and a married Indian man. It highlights the cultural preference for sons and the burden placed on women through the dowry system, often resulting in violence and neglect of women. It presents a fragmented narrative that allows for a multi-faceted exploration of how gender is entangled with politics, religion, and social change in modern India.

The novel serves as a critical commentary on the state of contemporary India. Through its exploration of communal violence, political corruption, and social inequality, the novel highlights the challenges facing a secular democratic nation. Tharoor's depiction of the Hindu-Muslim divide during the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict exposes the darker side of India's communal politics, while his portrayal of gender issues sheds light on the ongoing struggles for women's rights and social justice. The novel also critiques the influence of external perspectives on India's internal affairs. It is a powerful and thought-provoking work that addresses significant themes of communal violence, political conflict, and social issues in India.

Conclusion

Tharoor sheds light on the profound effects of communalism, the struggles faced by women in a patriarchal society, and the broader socio-political tensions that continue to shape modern India. He depicts a "gender-biased society" where there is a wide gap between the cultural rhetoric of worshipping women and the reality of their oppression. The women are trapped by their husbands, their families, and their own traditional submissiveness, often unable to challenge the "prison house" of their circumstances. They are shown to suffer from both ideological violence and traditional patriarchal violence.

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