

# Book Review of the Novel – “Riot A Novel”

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## ABSTRACT:

*A novel based on a riot in India which happened in 1989- about love-hate, religious fanaticism, cultural collision and ownership of history.*

*The questions that bounces in the mind of the readers are like why would someone want to murder such an idealistic, highly motivated American student who came to India for a noble cause of volunteering in womens health program? Was it a xenophobic attack by the mob ? Was it a revenge by the locals on the district magistrate, Lakshman? Was that illegitimate affair had spun out of her control? Or was she one of the many innocent victims of a riot in that particular fateful year of 1989 between the two religions i.e hindus and muslims ?*

*The acclaimed author of bestselling novels including The Great Indian Novel, The era of darkness, Why I am a Hindu? and many others, Tharoor has been a favourite of Indian readers throughout the decade. Masterfully experimenting with the narrative form he has chronicled the death mystery of Priscilla Hart through a dozen or more contradictory characters. The novel point out the issues which need to be addressed more seriously than they are right now. It touches upon the issues which are sensitive to both Hindu and Muslim communities and he also balances the viewpoints tactfully and is clever not to write in a manner as if he is taking side of one religion.*

The novel “RIOT” has been written by great politician, former Indian diplomat and established Indian English novelist, Shashi Tharoor. Taking history as its base, Tharoor revisits or review the past with his objective view and with the touch of irony, transforming it into a historio graphical (*the art of rewriting history*) meta fiction that, by depicting historical events and personalities, proliferates history.

The riot's fictional account, the real events associated with India's coca cola controversy and Ram Janm Bhoomi / Babri Masjid's conflicts shows Shashi Tharoors understanding of Indian society. Riot marks the understanding that treats history as fiction. Riot marks the emergence of a fresh viewpoint with regard to fiction in its clear diversity. The novel is published in two different cover pages for targeting different kinds of audiences. In India, the novel was published by Viking Penguin under the head of “**Riot: A Novel**”, whereas in America it was published by Arcade under the title “**Riot: A Love Story**”. In India, the cover page depicts the image of communal disharmony, scenes of riots, graphical description of hatred and crime whereas in America the cover page depicts a rather pleasant picture of the monument.

“Riot” is almost like a documentary. It is divided into seventy-eight sections. It begins and ends with the same newspaper article, the introduction of newspaper article has been taken in the beginning and the remaining is attached at the end. Characters are introduced through series of reports, interviews, transcripts, journals, diary entries and poem written by character, Priscillas own scrapbook and journal entries of Lakshman. It is given in

its original form and he left the interpretation on the part of the reader. There were a lot of narrative voices speaking inside this novel. Events have been described from multiple prescriptive.

Riot is a love story between an idealist American girl, Priscilla Hart and a married young Indian administrator **Lakshman** of Zailgarh, Uttar Pradesh. It is based on the incidents of riot, theme of love, hate, collision in culture and ideology, ownership of history, diversity and intolerance. In this novel two passions have been exposed —

- Passion of having sexual intimacy and
- Communal passion.

It is a mixture of reality, history and fiction. The novel depicts at least 4-5 different peoples view about the *Rama Janm bhoomi/Babri Masjid controversy*.

The novel begins with the announcement of the demise of an American social worker Priscilla

Hart in the aftermath of procession held after Ram Shila Pooja. The Ram Shila pooja has been glorified by Hindu communist leaders. In this pooja the bricks for constructing the Ayodhya Ram Temple were worshiped and consecrated in different parts of the town and sent to Ayodhya.

The Journalist of the New York Journal and her parents arrive in the dusty town to reveal the mystery of her death. The love is depicted through a sequence of Priscilla's narratives and the district magistrate, Lakshman's journal. Other voices include her father, who had spent time in India as an executive for Coca Cola, and indulged in extra marital with his Indian lover, Nandini, due to which their marriage eventually broke up. Priscilla thus received her first exposure to disintegration of family at the age of twelve only.

It also throws light on religious fanatics and secular scientists about the demolition of the Babri Masjid and the Hindu-Muslim relationships and the events that led to the riots. She later goes as a volunteer to India and entangled in love with handsome and erudite man, Lakshman. She kisses him impulsively on his cheek on Valentine's day, 1989 and then they passionately make love. The description of affair is given through Lakshman's and Priscilla's writings, interspersed within her parents' diaries.

With its storyline and characterization, the novel fascinated me. By going through the novel we also come across the fact that Indian children are supposed to obey every decision made by their parents for them. Author has highlighted the dominance of Indian parents over their children in every phase of life. Gurinder wanted to be a modern peasant and Lakshman wanted to be an English writer but both ended giving civil services exam and holding government positions. Gurinder works as police superintendent whereas Lakshman was posted as a district magistrate. Moreover Lakshman was forced into arrange marriage against his wish.

Also in America, love leads to marriage but in India, marriage is an arrangement between two families. Couples are supposed to love and have sex after their marriage. Lakshman feared scandal and social boycott and that's why he continues to live in his unhappy married life rather than going with Priscilla. Priscilla was curious to know about Lord Rama as Ram Shila pooja was going on in Zalilgarh. She was disturbed to know that Rama ordered his wife, Sita to undergo *agni pariksha* - to prove her innocence and purity. Here agni-pariksha is for testing her modesty as she was kidnapped by Ravana and was living in his palace.

The novel also emphasizes on the issue of violence against women. Sundri- Kadambari's married sister, a helper with Priscilla Hart, is a male dominated society's hapless prey. She was frequently beaten by her husband, Rupesh and her mother-in-law. She was called a witch as after their marriage her husband lost his job, they tortured her for bringing less dowry. When they came to know that she is carrying a baby girl, they threw kerosene oil on her and burn her with the intention to kill but she survived. Moreover case was not filed against them as it was depicted as a mere kitchen accident. It shows that we worship women in our culture and talk about giving women a respectable status, but we don't really care about that in fact. Our society is biased towards gender. The son is worshipped while the daughter is considered as burden.

The Indians are, last but not least, superstitious. A traditional Hindu believes in myths, stars and astrology. Geeta, the spouse of Lakshman is an emblematic representative of an individual of such type. She is both religious and superstitious. When she came to know that her husband has chosen to move to the United States with Priscilla, she went to the temple of Lord Shiva to seek the help of Swami Ji. She prays, fasts and seeks blessings from the divine universe in order to save her relationship. Indians believe in fairies and ghosts. As rightly said by Lakshman : *"In India, myths and legends are very slow to die"*.

Riot is a combination of multiple themes going hand in hand. There is a conflict between sexual love and duty bound love, American culture versus Indian culture, secularists strand of Indian culture versus the extremists strand of Indian culture, Islam versus Hindu history. Tharoor touches the issues sensitive to both Hindus and Muslims. Series of events have been described from different point of view and perspective. Themes like diversity, intolerance and communal disharmony have also been discussed.

The book portrays a real situation or reality of India. Tharoor tried to experiment with the writing style of the book. In this novel he attempts to do something new. He presented a good combination of history and fiction. He engages the reader with a very critical point in the history of India. It can be concluded that in many ways history and fiction goes hand in hand. He doesn't focus on a particular stand but introduce several view point and leave on the reader to form his/her own opinion. During riots it is not just Hindu and Muslim community that is affected but the lives of innocents also get disturbed. The book has a lot of information about history and culture of India. Unlike other books which lean towards a particular side while explaining a bilateral situation,

the book explores pros and cons of both the aggrieved parties and their common history. The book is full of information. Tharoor didnt take or support or favor any view point he just presented multiple views and left the interpretation part on the readers.

Tone of the book is thought provoking. Book contains little or no dialogue, it is just a collection of letters, journals and reports. There were lot of intellectuality as quotes from Mahabharata, Ramayana, Bible, Kama Sutra, Oscar Wilde and also the Vedas have been taken to discover the truth. He also uses several figures of speech to make novel more interesting.

Tharoor tried his level best at pointing out the history and situation of turmoil which existed between the religions and a love story between two culturally different people. It raises the issues of times specificities, cultures and places to enlight the larger questions like *Who we are? By what we define ourselves? What we hate? Why do we hate? We are the prisoners of whom?* According to Tharoor each character in this novel raised these complicated questions and the answers are to be found by the reader.

Unfortunately, after entering into politics Tharoors portion or share in literature seems to have declined. But I believe that this book deserves more attention than it has got.