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SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT: A SYNERGIC VIEW

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ABSTRACT:

Creative literature have always been a discursive space where pressing issues and concerns are engaged and debated wherein Fiction as a genre has always provided ample scope to examine the Nation. The Indian English Novel has changed from time to time reflecting the changes in the age, context and the perception of the writer. Experimentation in technique has always been a part of the postcolonial English fiction in India, although sporadic. The novels of the 1980s and 90s have adopted experimental narrative techniques which introduced fantasy, magic realism, spatial patterns and linguistic structures. The narrative has thus contributed towards defining the ethos of the new millennium literature from the Indian subcontinent.

*My paper is a modest attempt to assess Shashi Tharoor's experimentation with the narrative in the fiction *Riot* (2001), by placing it against the new theory of narrative called cognitive narratology. My attempt is to assess his narrative as a cognitive instrument, where the meaning is not simply there as a conventional unit of signifier and signified but is constructed in order to impose form upon the continually changing realities that are experienced.*



KEYWORDS: *Creative literature , Indian subcontinent , technique.*

INTRODUCTION

Creative literature have always been a discursive space where pressing issues and concerns are engaged and debated wherein Fiction as a genre has always provided ample scope to examine the Nation. The Indian English Novel has changed from time to time reflecting the changes in the age, context and the perception of the writer. Experimentation in technique has always been a part of the postcolonial English fiction in India, although sporadic. *The*

New Indian Novel in English as the fiction written in India, post Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), has come to be referred as and has yielded a whole new tribe of Indian English Novelists. Most of them are aware that the issues pertaining to the Indian subcontinent need to be skillfully narrated as there is an increasing tendency to view the novelistic form as synonymous with the shape of the nation. The novels of the 1980s and 90s have adopted experimental narrative

techniques which introduced fantasy, magic realism, spatial patterns and linguistic structures. The narrative has thus contributed towards defining the ethos of the new millennium literature from the Indian subcontinent.

My paper is a modest attempt to assess Shashi Tharoor's experimentation with the narrative in the fiction *Riot* (2001), by placing it against the new theory of narrative called cognitive narratology. My attempt is to assess his narrative

as a cognitive instrument, where the meaning is not simply there as a conventional unit of signifier and signified but is constructed in order to impose form upon the continually changing realities that are experienced. During the days of structuralist literary theory, narratology was supposed to be a scientific project. Later poststructuralists claimed that scientific theory itself is just another narrative, with no privileged status over other narratives. Post-structuralism had a great impact on literary theory and most narratologists gave up on their dream of a true science of narrative. Meanwhile narrative has become the subject matter of many disciplines outside the domain of literary studies. The functions of narrative are now theorized in historiography, journalism politics, religion etc. Everything around us seems to have a narrative. Narrative, in other words is a basic mode of thinking or a cognitive instrument.

The idea of narrative representation as a form of cognition made its entry into narratology in the last decades of the twentieth century. This new theory of narrative is called cognitive narratology. This development shows a significant trend in contemporary narrative theory. David Herman, in his introduction to *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative*, makes the strong claim that narrative theory should be viewed as a sub domain of the cognitive sciences and that both language generally and narrative specifically can be viewed as tool-systems for building mental models of the world¹.

The scope of my paper is limited to analyzing the narrative of the author and does not include the issue of communal divisions. I wish to assess Tharoor's use of 'time', 'multiple focalization' and 'aporia' in his narrative as tools for structuring human experience. Shashi Tharoor has expressed his concern over the growing communal divisions in his non-fiction writing *India - From Midnight to the Millennium* and various newspaper columns. Shashi Tharoor states in a conversation with First City,

I felt that I must explore the issue through the medium' of fiction, because fiction illuminates issues in a unique way". He goes on to say that the novel by focusing on "one place, one time, a small group of people helps illuminate the kind of issues I want to talk about-our identity and communalism and so on.²

Tharoor starts the novel with a fictitious 1989 news story, which closely resembles two historical facts. A friend of Tharoor sends him a very detailed report about a riot in Madhya Pradesh. Almost at the same time he reads a newspaper report that an American woman has been killed in a racial riot in South Africa. These two events have been intermingled together to produce *Riot*. The entire novel is set in the year 1989. This year has been selected because of its history- a time which led to the major Ayodhya issue. The actual time span that covers the events in the novel is only eight and a half months- from 2 February 1989 to 16 October 1989. Priscilla Hart is murdered on 30 September 1989. There are however several references to various historical events that happened before and after 1989 in the novel.

Priscilla Hart was raised in India, where her father was a Coca-Cola executive. She returns to India after college to do social work. After involving herself in an affair with a local married magistrate, she is murdered. The investigation brings to light not only the events behind the murder but a potpourri of racial tensions and religious bigotry in a small Indian town, Zalilgarh. *Riot* slips back and forth in time, before and after the murder thus taking its readers on a trip down the memory lane and another into the future of the story. Time is interwoven in the narrative of the text. The plot of the novel justifies the way time is treated. In a reaction to the media's report on the Mumbai terror, this is what Arundathi Roy had to comment,

We've forfeited the rights to our own tragedies. As the carnage in Mumbai raged on, day after horrible day, our 24-hour news channels informed us that we were watching "India's 9/11" ... But November isn't September, 2008 isn't 2001, Pakistan isn't Afghanistan and India isn't America. So perhaps we should reclaim our tragedy and pick through the debris with our own brains and our own broken hearts 'so that we can arrive at our own conclusions³.

In a similar vein, renowned historian Romila Thapar, in an interview with Kalpana Sharma, states "the media representations of the Mumbai terror attacks demonstrated, we can't do justice to contemporary events unless we understand our own history better"⁴ In *Riot*, Tharoor uses the past to make understand the present. His narrative contextualizes the circumstances of the riot in an attempt

to put the (Indian) readers to self-examination, in other words places trust on their cognitive understanding of historicity of time, about which he elaborates:

I think the best crystal ball is the rear-view mirror. . . It is part of the writer's job to recapture moments in history. My novel stands as portrait of time, of tendencies that were brought to the fore, the genie that was let out of the bottle and could not be put back. I felt we should take that genie by looking it squarely in the eye⁵.

Tharoor creates, an elaborate structure, scientifically constructed to narrate the story, through newspaper clippings, personal letters, notebooks, scrapbooks, private conversations, diary entries, interview transcripts, journals and even poems penned by the characters. There are seventy-eight entries in the novel. The different fragments of the plot, thus unfolds through different voices and stylistic forms. Thus the complexities that surround a riot are presented for the readers to understand through multiple perspectives; 'Focalization' is the perspective from which events are narrated, while 'multiple focalizations' refer to different perspectives adopted to comment on the same event. It is 'multiple focalizations' that Tharoor has employed in his narrative replacing the omniscient narrator with a band of narrators. Several people give accounts of what happened, and all are convinced they know the truth. Through Lakshman, Tharoor expounds his own philosophy of writing a novel,

I would like to write a novel that doesn't read like a novel. Novels are too easy - they tell a story, in a linear narrative, from start to finish ... I would do it differently in which you can turn to any page and read ... They're all connected, but you see the interconnections differently depending on the order in which you read them⁶.

This narrative seems to dovetail with the trends of the times where an individual is often left to comprehend a situation or event, (a cognitive action in its own right) from an array of perspectives presented to him through sound bytes and other forms of communication.

Riot is in fact a probe, an inquiry into the reasons behind Priscilla Hart's murder and thereby the riot. But the murder remains unsolved. Tharoor however offers three options as possible reasons for the murder. Priscilla could have been murdered either by the Hindu nationalist, Ram Charan Gupta to indirectly strike her lover, D.M.Lakshman or by the angry Muslim husband of the woman whose cause was protected by Priscilla. It could also simply be that she was 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'. Tharoor's use of 'aporia' (unresolved doubt or moment of undecideability) in the textual apparatus of the narrative serves cognitive purposes. The inference is left to the readers' reasoning capabilities. Central to this argument is a new brain imaging study which suggests that readers build vivid mental simulations of narrative situations.⁷ Nicole Speer, lead author of this study, says findings demonstrate that reading is by no means a passive exercise. Rather, readers mentally simulate each new situation encountered in a narrative. Details about actions and sensation are captured from the text and integrated with personal knowledge from past experiences. These data are then run through mental simulations using brain regions that closely mirror those involved when people perform, imagine, or observe similar real-world activities. The narrative design in *Riot* thus shapes the mental process where the readers from the details gathered from the narration, make inferences. Tabish Khair says in Tharoor's case,

the aporia seems less significant at first glance. It seems to have to do with the murder of a character only. But if one reads this murder against the backdrop of the riot, one sees a deeper and more troubled picture.... the ultimate aporia in *Riot* leaves the matter suspended between the personal and the public⁸.

The text thus becomes a series of cues which prompt activities in the reader, and it is these activities which give form to the narrative. The narrative in *Riot* leaves it to the reader to decide which truth he or she would like to follow. It makes it clear, that the Indian reality with its long and varied history and its current pluralisms and conflicts is too complex to be reduced to a simple formula: "There is more than one answer to every question and more than one way of looking at every particular problem,"⁹ says Tharoor.

Shashi Tharoor's narrative shows that the concept of narrative representations as a mode of thinking has far reaching consequences for narratology, exploring the potential of narrative to bridge disciplines, in ways that may in turn throw new light on narrative itself.

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