



DECODING INTERDISCURSIVITY AS AN EFFECTIVE MECHANISM FOR RECREATING HISTORY IN SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor, a renowned Indian English writer, is often highlighted for his exceptional language skills and writing style. Among his three novels, *Riot* has been largely devoted to visualize the effects of postcolonialism in India and to record the historically significant moments after western colonization. The story has been setup on the backdrop of communal riot in the fictional village, Zalilgarh. The communal riot for years has been regarded as a prominent issue in the post-colonial India. Though, Tharoor's major focus is on the description of India, the story revolves around the death of an American girl, Priscilla Hart. The entire novel talks about the mysterious death of Priscilla Hart during the riot. The paper focuses on Tharoor's unique narrative technique of blending various literary genres in his historical fiction to recapture the moments in Indian history.

KEYWORDS : Interdiscursivity, Postcolonialism, History, Postmodern, Metafiction

INTRODUCTION

Postmodern literature has exclusive characteristics with several paradoxical and conflicting flavours. Interdiscursivity can be considered as one of the prominent features in postmodern fiction. To put it in simple words, interdiscursivity is the intermingling of certain attributes of other discourses or genres in a work of art. Intertextuality and interdiscursivity may seem ditto, but they are unidentical in their own way as intertextuality involves using references taken from other texts in a text, whereas, interdiscursivity denotes the existence of various genres within a text.

Riot differs from the other two Shashi Tharoor's novels in its narrative style. Tharoor usually employs allusions and metaphors to project the theme of his novels. But in this novel, the entire fiction is in the form of letters and diary notes. *Riot* cannot be regarded simply as a fictional work because Tharoor incorporates more historical elements and hence it is fit to name it under the genre, Historiographic Metafiction. Through the novel, Tharoor again tries to explore the reality of post-colonial India with all its Indianness trapped inside the illusion of western thoughts. Tharoor's another area of expertise is the political satire and he is well known for his daring commentaries on past and contemporary politics. His works, both fiction and non-fiction, are rich in satirical and ironical elements.

The paradoxical nature of history is that though it can be regarded as a recording of true events which is very close to reality, it also has different perspectives based on the eyes through which it is seen. In the novel, Tharoor emphasized these multifarious faces of history by recording the communal riot from the perspectives of multiple narrators. Unlike his other novels, Tharoor hasn't divided the novel into chapters, he presented it in the form of recorded interviews, diary notes and letters. The amalgamation of such non-fictional genre in the fictional world adds more historical and realistic sense to the novel.

Interdiscursivity – A window to the past:

According to Dominick Le Capra (1985), "the past arrives in the form of texts & textualized remainders – memories, reports, published writings, archives, monuments and so forth." (p.128). True to his argument, past travels across boundaries and has its impact in the present and future largely in the form of writings of any kind. Postmodern literature usually befriends postcolonial thoughts which aims at revamping the colonial experiences and its impact in the socio-political

arena. Indian English writers also go on with this trend and as a result, Indian colonization by the British followed by the western influence that still lingers in the contemporary lives of Indian people are realistically portrayed in their works. Though the fictions of the earlier century were purely fictive as they were the by-products of authors' imagination alone. But the postmodern readers demand something beyond the formalistic construction which stimulated the contemporary writers to cross the boundaries which marked the onset of fictional writings of anomalous varieties. One such category is historiographic metafiction that imbibes the characteristics of two contradictory domains of history and fiction. As per the term suggests, though the novels of this kind recollect historical moments, the metafictional elements in the novel often gives hints to the readers of its fictitious quality.

Shashi Tharoor, widely known for his non-fictional writings, has produced three novels to his credit which can be regarded as the specimen of representing the postcolonial India with all its pros and cons. *Riot*, on the outset may appear as a usual cinematic love story that blooms in a land of communal violence and fanaticism. Through the love track between Priscilla and the District Magistrate, Lakshman, Tharoor implicitly stresses on the Indians' craze over western culture even after the independence from the British empire. He portrays the effects of colonialism in India lingering throughout the country even after all these years of freedom. Similarly, while talking about Priscilla's father, Rudyard, the in-charge of American Coke company in India, Tharoor stresses on the western influence over the life style of Indian people. In order to achieve his mission of bringing back the historical episodes of religious fanaticism and its consequences in India immediately after the freedom from the clutches of British rule, Tharoor designed his novel by combining various genres. Here, interdiscursivity highly contributes in making the novel a historiographic metafiction by regaining the historicity of the plot amidst all the elements of a proper fiction.

The opening of the novel itself indicates the prominence of interdiscursivity in the work as Tharoor begins the novel with a journal article that reports the mysterious death of Priscilla Hart. The development in the plot and glimpses on the investigation on Priscilla's case has been delivered to the readers in the form of journal articles. In an attempt to create a realistic impulse of reading a newspaper or a journal, Tharoor discontinued an article and resumed it towards the end of the novel, a style or method found in newspapers for long articles.

In addition, this also increases the interesting factor and suspense element of the plot while readers are eagerly waiting to catch up with the climax of the article in a curiosity of knowing what had happened in the past. It is highly noted that the characters of the novel and the love plot between Priscilla and Lakshman are the products of author's imagination, except for the historically significant communal riot which left a strong imprint in the post-independent Indian history. In spite of the fictional elements, the incidents being presented in the form of journal article gives an authentic touch, which in turn assists in boosting the historicity of the novel.

Tharoor's use of interdiscursivity has been once again accentuated through the usage of verse form occasionally in the novel. Among the myriad genres of writing, poem or verse can be considered as the powerful mode of articulating feelings and emotions. Similarly, the leading personae of the novel, Priscilla Hart and Lakshman often disclose their private emotions in their personal scrapbook and journals. One such poetic rendition by Priscilla in her scrapbook titled, 'Christmas in Zalilgarh' clearly depicts the chaotic condition of rural India in the 1980s.

"Mists of dust on crumbling roadsides,
Cowdung sidewalks, rusting in roofs.,
Bright-painted signboards above dimly lit shops.
The tinkle of bicycle bells, the loud cries
Of hawkers selling vegetables, or peanuts, or scrap.
Red betel-stains on every wall
Compete with angry black slogans
Scrawled by men with a cause." (Tharoor, 2001, p.15)

The poem in the scrapbook of Priscilla emphasizes the social, political and economic chaos that were predominant in the history of post-independent India. Meanwhile, Tharoor by narrating the Indian condition through the eyes of an American girl gives a different dimension to the history.

In this novel, Tharoor again shifted his narrative to a verse form through a poem by the male protagonist, Lakshman. His poem is an advice to the world's politicians entitled as 'How to Sleep at Night', which begins with the lines,
"Try to think of nothing.
That's the secret." (p.90)

On the outset, the poem looks simple and comical in its tone, but it implies deeper meaning which ironically criticizes the politicians and the political setup that collapsed after the British rule in India. Another irony to be noted here is that the commentary on government has been made by the government servant, Lakshman, who belongs to Indian Administration Service. Meanwhile, the poem can be considered as a collective thought of every common man's dissatisfaction over the Indian political system. Thus, Tharoor skilfully inserted the poem in the plot for a persuasive description on Indian politics during the 1980s.

Tharoor not only employed verse form in the novel to deal with the societal factors, but also in several stages he hired these elements of poetry to efficiently convey the personal feelings such as love, dilemma and so on. The college life of Lakshman has been presented artistically through a poem, which seems to be a kind of autobiography expressed in a poetic language.

Throughout the novel, Tharoor's narration has been disguised in various forms switching from one genre to another. Apart from the journal articles and poem, the plot also interweaves the countenance of letters, diary notes, personal journals, transcriptions of interviews by the journalist, and so on. Especially, the direct interviews by Randy Diggs with the major fictitious characters narrated in the form of transcriptions seem more precise and original. These transcriptions also justify the notion that history cannot be confined to a single

version and it changes its colours based on the perspectives and experiences of the individuals.

CONCLUSION:

In *Riot*, Tharoor attempts to portray the ill effects of partition of India initiated by the British government. Though the events of the novel take place in a fictional village, the events pictured are real in the pages of Indian history which can be related to the issues happening in the present Indian scenario. It is quite obvious that Tharoor masters the art of handling interdiscursivity to retell the historical moments skilfully coated with imaginary elements, which resulted in a striking historiographic metafiction.

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