



CULTURAL IDENTITY AND RELIGIOUS HYBRIDITY IN SELECT WORKS OF SHASHI THAROOR

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor, an acclaimed diplomat, has become a popular writer with the publication of his unique novels that are known for their cultural record of India, the religious panorama of India and the picture of Indian myths. The paper focuses on two renowned novels of Tharoor - *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which brings out a parallel study between the characters of the *Mahabharata* and the Indian political leaders and *Riot* (2001), which traces the events of cultural activism and religious confrontation in the Indian scenario.

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Posting the novel *Riot* amidst the morbid sectarian clashes in 1989 in North India, Shashi Tharoor explores the cultural diversity in Native India. Tharoor voices his assertive views on how culture is broken up due to the hatred between communities, and carefully delves into the controversy over the Babri Masjid. The backdrop of the novel is set in 1989 when Ram Sila Poojan Programme was undertaken by Hindus to rebuild the temple in Ram Janma Bhoomi which led to the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992.

Tharoor reflects in length the pluralism in Indian kaleidoscopic culture that consists of a continuous play of history, culture and power. He deals with the multiple assaults on the Republic of India, such as language, religion, caste and class and how they play a significant role in breaking up Indian culture into individual entities. According to Tharoor,

India currently boasts 18 nationally recognized languages, 17 other distinct languages and 22,000 dialects. He tells in *Riot* through Lakshman, the young Magistrate of Zailgarh, "Language groups have their own political entities to look forward to give expression to their linguistic identity.... Language divides" (42). Through an interesting love story, he spins out potent social commentary and a broad historical analysis. Though 82% of Indians are Hindus, they are fragmented into castes and sub castes, and classes – upper, middle and lower class. Tharoor further studies that the privileged elite is just 5 % whereas 75% of Indians are formed by the poor, lower class.

Apart from these divisions and discriminations haunting India, another cause for the cultural collisions and communal tensions in the country is religion. He observes in his text:

Religion also breeds what we in this country call “communalism” – the sense of religious chauvinism that transforms itself into bigotry, and sometimes violence, against the followers of other faiths Skulls have been broken over each of these issues. But the basis principle is simple indeed. Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone else, that’s the secret. Ensure that democracy protects multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian all at once. (44 – 45)

Parallel to these discriminations and ideological discussions is the plot that traces the story of the 24-year-old American student Priscilla Hart, who is killed mysteriously in a communal riot. The compelling panorama drawn by Tharoor evokes the disturbed life of the opposing communities and the atrocities of communal and cultural difference.

The quest to understand India is another key point in the book. India holds multiple identities and Tharoor upholds that India can thrive only if it appreciates the myriad cultures and histories contained within its borders. Different ideological dispositions put up new different histories in accordance with race, gender and class. Priscilla Hart is unable to make herself feel free with the culturally constructed forms of Indian knowledge, beliefs, codes and customs. Each contradictory identity has been constructed with an “imagining of history”. As the riots arise due to the clash in identities, she too gets destructed in the riots. She is an alien intruder into the alien culture of India and the alien land and its alien culture torsions swallow her up. Riots prove that cultural collisions can be severe manifestations of danger and destruction that a new history eats up the history already created so far.

Tharoor shows how in India, the individual’s beliefs and values are constructed through cultural and political pressures and sometimes by oneself. The clash between the private and the public, between one’s individual beliefs and the beliefs of others is thus a confrontation that sometimes results in a riot and this is dealt thoroughly in the novel. Tharoor insists that in India, “the concept of secularism is not an absence of religions, but the presence of religious pluralism” (Ghosh).

The Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces such as, the ancient Hindu tradition, myth, scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and two centuries of British Colonial rule. The result is unique. Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of India. With diversity emerging from the geography of India and inscribed in the history of India, India is made for pluralism. Tharoor tells “The singularity about India is that we can speak about it in the plural.” He focuses on religion on how the secularization of religion in India means religious pluralism rather than religious absence. He reveals the various conflicts between the cultural manifestations in India – between bread and democracy, pluralism versus fundamentalism, centralism versus federalism and globalisation versus self-reliance. In spite of such vagaries, Tharoor feels that India’s greatest strength is its growing pluralism and it emerges from the very nature of the country and this pluralism demands an equal religious pluralism too. Tharoor writes in his essay on “A Culture of Diversity” that “the idea of India is not based on language, not on geography, not on ethnicity and not on religion. The idea of India is one land embracing many. . . . It’s the choice made inevitable by India’s geography, reaffirmed by its history and reflected in its ethnography”

<http://shashitharoor.com.html>.

Tharoor writes of his belief that Hinduism is “uniquely a religion without any fundamentals.” He elaborately deals with how ideologically Hinduism bears no hostility on other religions and how it doesn’t force its principles on other religions. Hence, there can be no room for violent clashes carried out in the garb of religion, particularly involving Hinduism. He highlights the unique generosity of Hinduism:

We have an extraordinary diversity of religious practices within Hinduism, a faith with no single book but many. . . . We have no compulsory injunctions or obligations. . . . So Hinduism is a faith so unusual that it is the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion. . . . It is a truth that admits of the possibility that there might be other truths.

<http://shashitharoor.com.html>

Hinduism that has traditionally been extremely open to change has been suddenly taken over by those rebels who have of late developed a notion of identity. Identity is certainly a hallmark of the phenomena that afflict the world today - the search for identity, the clashes between identities. Tharoor states that Hinduism is not synonymous to India and that Hinduism is not the only religion to be followed within the territories of India. Every Indian has a multiplicity of identities and the illusion of a solitary identity will merely cultivate violence in the scene.

Religious fanatics ascribe a singular identity for them by calling themselves "Hindus", and thereby their human identity becomes belittled. He quotes Amartya Sen's term "Choiceless singularity" from his book *Identity And Violence: The Illusion of Destiny*. Reducing individuals into the singular status of their religion alone can only instigate communal disputes and violence. More political grievances, real or imagined are articulated only in terms of religion. When other avenues of identity mobilization are either restricted or difficult and in societies where political patterns are restricted to the one primordial identity of religion, it is natural for sectarians to stoop to misuse secularism. He quotes the words of UN General Secretary Kofi Annan:

The problem is never with the faith, but with the faithful. All faiths strive sincerely to animate the divine spark in each of us; but some of their followers, alas, use their faith as a club to beat others with, rather than a platform to raise themselves to heavens.

<http://moon.jrn.columbia.edu/SAJA/shashi.html>

India is a secular country and is a confluence of all religions in the world. India has four major religions and "is home to every faith of mankind with the possible exception of Shintoism," Tharoor says. Particularly in *Riot*, Tharoor challenges the prejudiced view of many Indians that only Hindus are Indians and he accuses that this concept is contradictory to Indian nationality. Stressing this, Tharoor presents people of almost all major religions in the novel *Riot*: Gurinder Singh, Superintendent of Police (a Sikh), Lakshman, a Magistrate (a Hindu), Ram Charan Gupta (leader of Hindu chauvinists), a Hindu fanatic, Professor Mohammed Sarvar (a muslim), Priscilla, a

24- year- old American scholar and volunteer of HELP-US, (a Christian). Even though most of the people follow Hinduism which accounts for 82%, the minorities are not neglected or suppressed. Indian government provides special privileges to the minorities to protect them and to uplift their status. Hinduism itself has its diversities: Chauvinists like Charan Gupta who organize the Hindus for mass agitation without thinking of the rights of the other Indian people; people like Gita, wife of Lakshman, who visits the temple regularly and seek mediators (saints or priests) to pray the God; and people like Lakshman, the District Magistrate, who thinks that God is with everyone and he rarely visits the temple, but shows respect to other religions. Similarly Prof. Sarvar, a Muslim in the novel argues that they are muslims, but they are Indians.

The selfish leaders are the turn-coats who provoke the people of different communities to wage a war against each other. Professor Sarvar lavishly praises leaders like Maulana, who took pride in being Indian Muslim and flays the hypocrisy of religious leaders like Jinnah, who incited the Muslims to seek a separate nation for them called Pakistan but, ironically married a non-muslim. Tharoor argues that such hypocritical politicians are responsible for the riots that took place in Zailgarh in Uttar Pradesh in 1989. Significantly, the riots are not exposed to be the cause of Priscilla's death. Tharoor ends the novel without unraveling the mystery with which it begins. He leaves the novel to the judgement of the reader, who is given the task of a detective in the novel. No one knows who killed Priscilla Hart. There are no clues, no confessions. "In riots all sorts of things happen", says Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police. "People strike first and ask questions later" (216).

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the narrator of Ved Vyas, is drawn as an eighty eight year old man who voices the opinions of Shashi Tharoor. In the *Mahabharata*, Duryodhana's refusal to share power with the Pandavas leads to his defeat and the ultimate destruction of his kingdom. Similarly, Priya Duryodhani in *The Great Indian Novel*, who represents Indira (Priyadharshini) Gandhi is obsessed with power and that leads to her defeat in the elections held in 1977. With his Swift-like satire,

Tharoor spares none who wants to become powerful by deceiving and defeating their brothers and fellow men. This novel portrays how people long for power and how they misuse their power when they are bestowed with power. They feel themselves to be omnipotent. He presents almost all the characters with wry humour and he exhibits scant respect for the political leaders of independent India.

Dictionaries may define secularism as the absence of religion. But, Indian secularism means a profusion of religions. Secularism in India means not irreligiousness, but multi religiousness. Tharoor observes that through out the decades after Independence, the political culture reflects these "secular" assumptions and attitudes. Though 82% of Indian population are Hindus, as already stated, and though Hindu-Muslim riots break out in India because of religious fanatics, two of India's first five Presidents were Muslims, so were innumerable Governors, Cabinet Ministers, Chief Ministers of States, Ambassadors, Generals and Court Justices. Hinduism asserts that religion is an intensely personal matter related to the individual's self realization to God. Faith is a matter of hearts and not of bricks and stone. So a true Hindu does not seek his revenge on the other religions for being a part of India.

Tharoor proves the point that the dynamics of Indian society are constantly changing and new identities are created through a healthy optimism. Ethnicity and language may complicate the question of identity and the identity of an Indian may span from one set of identities and cross into another. But secularism and multiple identities will set the boundaries far and negotiable. Tharoor points out the stunning growth in the recent situation, considered the most laudable in India:

Two years ago, after the awe-inspiring experience of the world's largest exercise in democratic elections, India offered the world the sight of a Roman Catholic political leader (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime Minister of India by a Muslim (President Abdul Kalam) — in a country 82 per cent Hindu, in English, a language mastered, if the last census is to be believed, by only 2 percent of the Indian population.

<http://shashitharoor.com.html>

The broad basic rules may be set in by history, but an Indian is free to improvise, unshackled by a written score and when diversity is held up in the Indian minds, India could be free from the calamities and conflagration flared up by religion.

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