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Riot: A Socio-Cultural Ethos

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Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001) is a novel about the history, love, hate, cultural collision, religious and fanaticism and the impossibility of knowing the truth. *Riot* narrates the story through journal entries, interviews, letters, scrapbooks, news paper clippings, extracts from personal diaries, and conversations. . He brings conflicts and sense of nationalism in the novel. Tharoor depicts reality from a multiple point of view. He points out a balanced picture of the views of the different communities. *Riot* is about the majority community, the Hindus trying to establish and reinforce their identity and the minority community, the Muslims, maintaining theirs. The novel describes how religion is used as a tool of exploitation which has made India a wounded civilization. It has dismantled the silence and strength of Indian unity and integrity. The novel is fusion of chaos, disorder, violence and riots which leads to create a picture of postcolonial India. Tharoor in *Riot* presents how the prejudiced the Westerners look at India as Oriental, poor, illiterate country. The novel also sheds light on the innocent victims like Priscilla, Sundari and Fatima Bi.

Tharoor in *Riot* presents the real picture of Indian women. women are so submissive that they cannot raise a question concerning their welfare; rather they submit to the demand of their men-folk and accept any number of pregnancies. Being forced to have babies is one form of oppression, of subjugation by men. Women are talented but weak to stand up and fight against the prison house of their tradition and society in limiting their family and thus providing their children a quality life and preserving their health. Fatima Bi is the representative of all such oppressed women. She lives with her husband and seven kids in a two-room flat. Her life style is very poor and miserable. She wants to overcome this miserable life, the pregnancies but her husband Ali, a male dominator, is not ready to follow this family planning program. Another story of Sundari is also representative of all those marginalized women. She is accused of carrying a female child in her womb. Even she is considered responsible for female child. Also she could not bring the expected dowry from her parents. Therefore, her husband and mother-in-law set her on fire. Such violence in Indian society frustrates Priscilla in her quest for solution. Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer working in association with 'HELP-US', wants to change the lives of Indian women. . She works to make aware the women of their reproductive rights not only to control population but to give them a sense of their rights as a whole, their right as women. If these women fight against such oppression then only they can improve their health and they have a real future so that they will give their daughters a real future. Her work is not easy because religion, age-old traditions and the male ego are the major obstacles in achieving her objective. She questions the authenticity of patriarchal society where a woman still suffers domestic violence in spite of sacrificing so much for her family. She feels confused as to why men are after women's life when they are trying to uplift their condition by showing a way of living infused with dignity and happiness. But she becomes the victim of the age old tradition. Her resistance against this social evil comes to an end with her death. Tharoor shows how the resistance of the female is kept under a male system of control by suppressing the power to make personal choices and using violence to woman for bearing children. The framework of joint family structure, economic dependence and gender bias interpreted through the cultural codes of

civilization sustains perpetuation of explosive patriarchal, communal and religious value system. Sundari and Fatima Bi are victims of cultural values and subjugation.

Besides the oppression of women *Riot* throws light on many contemporary issues on history. *Riot* is based on the actual incident related to a riot that took place in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. This incident is combined with another incident, the death of an in South Africa who was killed in the racial disturbances. Tharoor has fictionalized these incidents in his novel. In one of the interview he said that his novel portrait time and it is part of writers job to recapture moments of history. Tharoor unfolds the history through his various characters. Ram Charan Gupta, a Hindu fundamental reader, supports the cause of construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. He strongly insists that the place of Babari Masjid is actually the place of birth of Lord Ram. By giving historical facts he proves his opinion. He informs that Hindu's temple of Ram destroyed by the Mughal emperor Babar in 1526. Babar has replaced it with a mosque, and these Hindus want to reverse the history and put the temple back where the mosque now stands as Hindu community has much hurt by this. To him, Muslims are evil people. They are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam than to India. According to him, Muslims are converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this. They believe that they all are descendants from conquerors. He expects that the non-Hindu people in India must adopt the Hindu culture and language. This is a hope for united India, a real urge to be unite. Mohammed Sarwar, a Muslim scholar, professor in Department of History, Delhi University tries to defend the Muslims and provides historical evidences. He believes that Islam has a great claim on the soil of India. He insists that Hindus should write a new history without doing violence. He hopes for united India where there is neither Hindu nor Muslim but both to call Indians. This is the new identity he wants.

Tharoor narrates about a state emergency in mid 75, proclaimed by Mrs. Gandhi. "She had been a dictator, for all practical purposes, for the twenty-two months she'd ruled under emergency, and she was, allowing the victims of her dictatorship the right to decide whether she could continue her tyranny!" (*Riot*:p.31). The issue of Golden Temple is also discussed in the novel which caused the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi. This assassination further result into massacre. The Police Supritendent, Gurinder Singh narrates how the blind retaliation by angry mobs caused countless massacre of innocent Sikh lives. He has lost his brother-in-law and nephew to mindless fury of blood thirsty mob.

Such historical incidents presents the picture of India after independence. Is it the India which has got new identity of massacre? Is it a proper way to resist? Do we have learnt anything from history? Are we happy with such chaos, disorder, violence in India? Are we rootless or do we have the roots of such massacre?

Tharoor has painted the real picture of India. He has severely presented in the eyes of foreigners and natives. The natives still find themselves poor, powerless, dependent, and weak. On the other hand foreigners look at India with their biased views. Ram Charan Gupta comments on how foreign journalists and photographers cover India. They cover India only as they are interested in the kind of India they want to see. The horrible, dark. India of killing and riots. They present the stories of poverty and widows, the caste system, untouchables, poor people selling their blood or kidneys, the slums, the dowry victims etc.. They portray India as weak and helpless victims of millennia of invasions. Rudyard describes India as a country with a middle class about hundred million. Katharine describes Zaliagarh as a bad place as flies buzz around everything. She finds India as people half-dressed beggar with open sores clamoring for money, ash-smeared sadhus in saffron waist-cloths and matted hair, men in dhotis and men in pants and men in kurta-pajamas, and women with golden bangles and silver anklets. The red stains make her to think of blood of tubercular or the homicide

rate are increased. But she comes to know that these stains are merely combination of a national addiction and poor hygiene has come as a relief.

Tharoor comments on the five major sources of division in India i.e. language, religion, caste, class, and religion. He describes multi-languages, untouchables as outside the caste system, majority of lower class people. *Riot* presents India in as Oriental, poor, helpless, oppressed under domination. full of communal riots and desiring for better hopes.

Thus, Tharoor in *Riot* depicts the socio-cultural ethos. He plainly describes how women in India do not enjoy a respectable position. They are considered to be secondary and are marginalized. As if they are a plaything in the hands of their husbands, protectors or lord beings. Poor People in India believe that children will contribute to family income and share the burden and responsibilities, so they insist on more children and do not think of women health or desire. To conclude, *Riot* examines some of the vital issues of Indian society which may transcend the limits of time, place and culture. Tharoor dreams of extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country. For him democracy will solve the problems and it is the only answer for the frustration of India's Muslim too.

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