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Polyphony and the Rashomon Effect: New Forms of Cross-Cultural Storytelling in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* (2001), also known as *Riot: A Love Story*, represents a significant experiment in narrative form not only in Indian English fiction but also in the world of literature. This paper examines the novel's fragmented narrative and cross-cultural voices that challenge monolithic histories of the communal incident and foreground the complexities of identity, cultural collision, and truth in a globalised postcolonial context. The novel's narrative technique breaks the conventional storytelling as the novel uses the pluralistic approaches, epistolary technique, polyphonic structure, the *Rashomon* effect, and flashback techniques. The novel's story is told in epistolary form. The epistolary form is known for a series of documents such as letters, newspaper clippings, and diaries. In addition, in this technological development era, epistolary novels may include emails and texts. This narrative style may create a sense of realism of any incident and the reader may experience reality while reading the novel through different characters' voices and perspectives. On the other hand, the polyphonic context in the novel involves multiple-perspective narration. The *Rashomon* effect emphasises on truth, saying that truth is not singular but constructed through various viewpoints. The present research uses these narrative techniques and resists singular truths. Along with these, linear historiography offers a polyphonic account of communal violence, cultural misunderstanding, and global modernity. Therefore, this novel may be a part of cross-genre literature at world literature forums. The novel constructs a networked narrative and mirrors the fractured realities of a globalised world by using the above-mentioned narrative techniques. The present paper aims to explore about the narrative form of the novel, which may enable the novel to travel across cultures as the novel attracts global readers into a dialogic engagement showing multiple truths, violence, identity, and representation. Furthermore, this paper attempts to glance at Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of polyphony. The present study argues that Tharoor's above-mentioned different narrative strategies reflect the complexities of postcolonial India of multiplicity, mediation, and interpretive openness. This complexity may fit the novel within world literature. Overall, this research paper utilises the library research method to accomplish selected goals and objectives.

Keywords: World Literature, Cross-Cultural Storytelling, Epistolary Technique, Polyphony, Rashomon Effect.

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Introduction

The twenty-first-century era is marked by technological development, globalisation, cultural contact, and ideological conflict. In this technological era, literature is one of the media that represent cultural meanings using different narrations of fragmented realities and contested truths. Indian regional literature as well as English literature is also part of these technological phenomena of globalisation. The present research considers Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* is a part of these phenomena as it significantly responds to this challenge. Tharoor does not use a unified narrative voice in the novel. The novel does not offer a definitive explanation of communal violence, but it constructs a work with multiple perspectives. These perspectives intersect, contradict, and coexist with each other. The present research examines the novel's narrative strategy of the '*Rashomon* effect'. The *Rashomon* effect is one of the strategies of a storytelling mode where a single event is narrated from diverse and multiple viewpoints. Moreover, the novel's polyphonic structure reflects the pluralism of Indian society. This structure addresses an international readership of multiplicity and ambiguity. This paper argues that *Riot: A Novel* represents a new form of cross-cultural storytelling in which narrative fragmentation becomes both an aesthetic choice and an ethical stance. While situating this research paper within the framework of world literature, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* is an example of how Indian English fiction has moved beyond realist and nationalist paradigms toward formally innovative and globally resonant storytelling practices.

Review of literature

The article "The *Rashomon* Effect: Combining Positivist and Interpretivist Approaches in the Analysis of Contested Events" (2002) by Wendy D. Roth and Jal D. Mehta explains that there are several conflicting accounts of the same event. These incidents resemble the narrative structure of *Rashomon*. In this research, the authors argue that contested events create multiple and contradictory testimonies, as it reflects different social positions, memories, and cultural

perspectives (131). They demonstrate contested events through case studies of school shootings. The paper studies that the witnesses interpret events differently according to their own worldviews, social roles, and personal interests. This represents divergent explanations (141–145). The study highlights several factors of memory limitations, trauma, and vested interests. These factors can shape or distort individual accounts (145–154). The authors show how to interpret one thing from different angles to examine contradictions. This is called triangulation. When one uses this method, one can think about different perspectives on a single thing. We do not have to try to find one true answer. They provide that interpretively informed triangulation is a good way to do research (154–163).

Vijay P Prince's article "Adaptation Study and Postmodern Analysis of *Rashomon*" (2018) discusses the *Rashomon* effect. This paper suggests that the *Rashomon* narrative concept is derived from the film *Rashomon*, directed by Akira Kurosawa. This paper points out that several witnesses provide conflicting interpretations of the same event. While offering different viewpoints, they may reveal the subjective nature of truth (7). The study explains that each witnesses' account is shaped by personal bias, emotions, and memory. These accounts ultimately lead to fragmented and contradictory accounts (8–9). It does not present a single objective reality, but narratives of the *Rashomon* Effect of different perceptions and perspectives to shape storytelling (9–10). Prince's study emphasises that psychological factors and social contexts shape individuals' interpretations (10–11). In this article, the *Rashomon* Effect challenges the idea of absolute truth. This may encourage readers or viewers to critically evaluate multiple perspectives in the narrative representation of a single event (12).

Masóud Kazemy's article "Polyphony and Dialogism" (2019) examines Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony and its relationship to dialogism in literary discourse. The article explains that polyphony is the presence of multiple independent voices and perspectives within a text itself, and no single voice dominates the narrative (32). Kazemy argues that

dialogism underlies polyphony, where meaning does not come from a unified perspective, but comes from the interaction of diverse voices (33–34). The study compares polyphonic narratives with homophonic ones(35). In the homophonic context, a single ideological voice controls the text. Kazemy identifies two forms of polyphony: opponent polyphony and proponent polyphony. These are either conflicting or supporting voices in narrative discourse (35). The article suggests polyphony creates a dynamic and democratic narrative structure and reflects ideological plurality and diverse social dialogue (35–37).

Dorothea Braemer (2023) explains that the polyphony idea was developed by Mikhail Bakhtin. Dorothea Braemer studies Handsworth Songs by the Black Audio Film Collective as an example of polyphonic documentary. She states that the polyphony means ‘many voices’ or ‘multiple independent perspectives’ existing simultaneously, and is borrowed from music. She claims Bakhtin used this concept to describe the novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky. The novel’s characters possess independent consciousnesses and voices, and are not controlled by an authorial perspective. This indicates polyphonic narratives avoid a single authoritative viewpoint and present multiple perspectives, which helps to coexist without resolution. According to Braemer, polyphonic storytelling contrasts with conventional character-centric narratives. On the one hand, traditional narratives focus on individual characters and psychological development and on the other hand, polyphonic narratives highlight situations, social conflicts, and diverse viewpoints. Polyphonic narratives remain open for interpretation. Therefore, polyphonic structure allows filmmakers to shift from individual stories to explore social and political issues systematically. Braemer concludes that polyphonic documentaries challenge the dominance of character-driven storytelling, which often reflects individualistic ideology (16–17).

The above-mentioned studies show that there is considerable critical engagement with the *Rashomon* effect and the idea of polyphony. However, these concepts are not applied to

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*. There are numerous studies based on Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*, but they focus on its political and postcolonial themes. This indicates the gap and insufficient attention to the novel's narrative form as a mode of cross-cultural storytelling. After reading the novel, one can understand that the novel uses a polyphonic structure, which comprises multiple voices, fragmented documents, and conflicting perspectives. The novel also produces a *Rashomon*-like effect, which challenges the idea of a single and authoritative truth. The above-mentioned scholarship assist to understand the narrative plurality as a function and deliberate strategy to represent cultural ambiguity and ideological conflict, especially in Indian religious contexts at a globalised platform. This present research attempts to address the gap of polyphony and the *Rashomon* effect together to reshape narrative techniques in *Riot: A Novel*. These may enable new forms of cross-cultural storytelling, which is in contradiction to the linear historiography and monologic representations in Indian English fiction.

Objectives

1. To examine how Tharoor's use of the polyphonic narrative techniques in *Riot: A Novel*
2. To analyse how multiple voices and fragmented forms contribute to the *Rashomon* effect, exploring narrative plurality functions as a mode of cross-cultural storytelling
3. To evaluate how Shashi Tharoor's narrative strategy is significant and representative in Indian English fiction as well as in world literature

Methodology

The present research employs a qualitative approach to investigate the topic of the study. The present analysis employs a library research method, which involves reviewing all published articles on polyphony and the *Rashomon* effect, and on how Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* fits into them. This research considers Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* as a primary source for this

article, and other related articles as secondary sources published on various websites, journals, and books.

Tharoor's fragmented narrative techniques suggest that the omniscient narrator favours different perspectives and may deliberately abandon a singular narrative. The novel uses various textual forms, official reports, personal journals, scrapbooks, and conversations, to represent the riot and its consequences as seen through the eyes of different characters. Each character offers their own version of events, which is shaped by influences from their cultural background, personal bias, or socio-political stance. These voices are: Priscilla's personal writings and scrapbook reflections; Lakshman's official diary entries; newspaper reports and interviews; and accounts from religious and political characters. This cumulative and assemblage of viewpoints results in a polyphonic narrative in which no single account claims final authority. This reflects the notion that meaning and truth are co-constructed through multiple lenses.

Theoretical Framework of Polyphony and the *Rashomon* Effect

Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics (1963) by Mikhail Bakhtin, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, describes that polyphony means that the novel contains a plurality of equally valid consciousnesses. This concept illustrates that characters are not finalised or controlled by the author, and their voices remain independent and open-ended. Furthermore, Bakhtin emphasises that the author does not impose a final judgment on characters (Bakhtin et al. 05-46). Additionally, polyphony is closely connected to dialogism, which features characters' voices interacting rather than hierarchy, and meaning is produced through interaction among voices (Bakhtin et al. 05-46). These kinds of narrative voices respond to each other, and discourse becomes dialogic rather than monologic. The key feature of this writing is the presence of multiple independent voices, which may allow characters to hold their own

ideological positions (Bakhtin et al. 05-46). These narratives provide a platform of equality of voices, where no single authoritative authorial voice (Bakhtin et al. 05–46).

The Bakhtin Reader: Selected Writings of Bakhtin, Medvedev and Voloshinov (1994), edited by Pam Morris, writes that polyphony refers to a multi-voiced narrative structure where multiple independent consciousnesses coexist within a novel without being subordinated to the author's single ideological viewpoint. Each character possesses their own voice, worldview, and ideological position. It is discussed mainly in the section "The Heteroglot Novel" under the topic "Dostoevsky's Polyphonic Novel: A Plurality of Consciousnesses". Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky created a new novelistic form in which characters are not objects of the author's discourse but subjects with autonomous voices (88–96). It is claimed that in a polyphonic novel, the author does not dominate characters, and these characters speak with equal ideological authority. The author organises the dialogue but does not close it with a final meaning. Bakhtin distinguishes polyphony from heteroglossia. Polyphony is the coexistence of multiple independent voices within the narrative structure, and Heteroglossia is the broader social diversity of languages and discourses (qtd. in Pam Morris 249).

The above discussion indicates that Mikhail Bakhtin used the idea of polyphony while analysing Dostoevsky's novels. This narrative structure allows for independent interpretation of multiple voices related to a single context. In a polyphonic text, characters do not represent only objectivity, but also reflect subjectivity with their own beliefs and the freedom of expression. Similarly, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* demonstrates a polyphonic approach by giving space to other characters with their own beliefs and distinct voices and rejects a single authority. As said earlier, *Riot: A Novel* also refuses the privilege of any single voice as authoritative. Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* uses personal diaries, letters, newspaper reports, academic interviews, official documents, and oral testimonies to develop the story of a communal incident, where

eight people died. These narrative techniques are discussed in detail in the section on narrative structure of Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*.

As discussed earlier, the *Rashomon* effect is given recognition in Akira Kurosawa's film *Rashomon* (1950). It highlights that unreliable truth can be shown through multiple as well as conflicting accounts of the same event. From these studies, one can consider that in literature, the *Rashomon* effect may serve as a useful tool for examining stories of subjectivity, memory, and interpretive uncertainty. When one looks through this lens, one can see that Tharoor reframes communal violence subjectively from the perspectives of many characters. On the other way, Tharoor presents two sides of the same coin as he provides a rich landscape of competing narratives of many religions. In support of this, the researcher would like to give an example from Karl Heider. According to Anthropologist Karl Heider, the *Rashomon* Effect concerns ethnographic disagreements. He states that "ethnographies are made, not found" (74). He writes that different researchers can produce different interpretations due to their own backgrounds, studying different theoretical approaches, perspectives, and different experiences (Heider 74). In addition, Anderson explains that the *Rashomon* Effect is not only about people having different opinions but also about people having stories that are equally believable (257). Therefore, the *Rashomon* Effect becomes important to understand people can have different ideas about the same thing. Due to these characteristics, the *Rashomon* Effect concept is important in communication studies, literature, psychology, anthropology, politics, sociology, legal studies, and so on, because these subject studies multiple interpretations without definite proof.

The present research paper considers Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* as a primary source and attempts to blend Bakhtinian polyphony with the *Rashomon* effect. This way, the present paper analyses Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*'s construction of narrative techniques. These techniques resist

closure and invite readers into an active process of meaning-making and also provide different interpretations.

Narrative Structure of Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

The novel breaks the traditional storytelling form by combining various narrative techniques, using personal diaries, letters, newspaper reports, academic interviews, official documents, and oral testimonies. Priscilla Hart's personal diary gives an account her education, upbringing, love affairs, family background, and the Indian socio-political-economic environment of the 1980s. In the novel, Priscilla sends a lot letters to Randy Diggs, her friend and journalist. These letters provide an information to Randy Diggs of Priscilla's love to Lakshaman; why and how she is in love with Lakshman. In the narrative structure of newspaper reports, Tharoor begins the novel with a report of Priscilla Hart's death in American newspapers. In the narrative structure of academic and administrative interviews, Randy Diggs, an American journalist and Priscilla's friend, conducts the interviews with Lakshman, the district collector and magistrate; Gurinder Singh, the superintendent of police; Mohmmad Sarwar, a professor; and others. The government's official documents narrate the history of communal violence. The above discussion indicates the fragmentated and mixed structure of story narration reflects the overwhelming subjective information and mediated realities of the contemporary world from different angles. The climax of the novel, which is the death of Priscilla Hart during a communal riot in the fictional town, Zalilgarh, is never told directly. Instead, it is pieced together from accounts by different characters, including Priscilla's parents, Rudyard Hart and Catherine Hart and Randy Diggs, an American journalist, Indian officials such as Lakshman, Collector and District Magistrate, Gurinder Singh, Superintendent of Police, local Hindu residents such as, Kadambari, Bhushan Sharma, and Ram Charan Gupta, and the Muslim residents such Prof Mohmmad Sarwar and Ali. These characters' perspectives are influenced by their own socio-economic, political, and cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and

emotions, making it difficult to find certainty. This highlights the fragmented narrative technique in the novel, which challenges the reader to find a single clear explanation of communal violence. Therefore, one can connect the novel to international storytelling traditions because it favours many voices over a single timeline. It also connects the readers to relatable stories from diverse backgrounds. This discussion gives compulsion to anyone to consider this non-linear and multi-vocal form of storytelling is an example of polyphony. This coexistence of independent voices within a single text for a single event is a literary parallel to the *Rashomon* effect, as the novel gives an account of conflicting accounts of the same events.

The *Rashomon* effect refers to various fragmented narrative structures provided from several characters and also gives discrepant accounts of the same event, leads to compel the reader to negotiate competing versions of truth. Kurosawa's *Rashomon* shows a little bit of direct conflict and climax, but in fragmented storytelling, it likewise underscores the contingency of truth. Similarly, *Riot: A Novel* does not show the ultimate climax from one angle, but from fragmented angles. Lakshman, the collector and Gurinder Singh, Superintendent of Police, describe the communal incident from an administrative and law-and-order perspectives. The local Hindu residents, Kadambari, who warns Priscill Hart not to visit Kotli, the abandoned and haunted place in the novel, where religious extremists keep arsenals and weapons. The political characters Bhushan Sharma and Ram Charan Gupta narrate that Hindu fundamentalists are taking appropriate action to counter the Muslim extremists and against the liberal government. Prof. Mohammad Sarwar, Professor and also represents Muslim perspectives, narrates that they are discriminated against after the partition of India, though they consider themselves as a part of secular India. Ali, another Muslim character, does number of atrocities against his own wife on several occasions, and still claims his actions are appropriate according to his religion. This multiplicity and fragmented accounts in *Riot: A Novel* suggest truth cannot be captured in a single narrative, especially when there is a terrain of

cultural conflict. Tharoor may emphasise the intention of the novel's structure, which allows each character to have their own voices, choices, biases, prejudices, and partial truths.

Encounters of Cross-Cultural in Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

Cross-cultural encounters are one of the key features of Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*. Priscilla Hart is a doctoral candidate and an American volunteer. She works at HELP US NGO. She may serve as a symbolic figure for both global and local contexts, as she has both experience and perspectives. Her personal writings reveal idealism, and her personal experiences reveal curiosity about Indian culture. While other characters view her presence in the contexts of nationalism, suspicion, or romanticisation.

The Indian voices in the novel are also diverse: on the one hand, secular intellectuals, characters Lakshman, Gurinder Singh, and Mohammad Sarwar; on the other, religious conservatives and political opportunists Bhushan Sharma, Ram Charan Gupta, and Ali. Similarly, Rudyard Hart, Catherine Hart, and Randy Diggs reflect American and foreign cultures and perspectives in the novel. This comparative study of foreign and Indian cross-cultural encounters indicates that Tharoor avoids the simple trap of presenting the homogeneity of the Indian society as well as foreign societies; instead, he presents the story from multiple perspectives with ideological conflict. The different challenges and conflicts underscore the complexity of cultural exchange. This polyphonic structure presents a cross-cultural dialogue, where no homogeneous voice dominates. These encounters inspire researchers from outside India to explore multiple and conflicting narratives and also encourages to examine their own views on culture, violence, and responsibility.

Priscilla Hart is the novel's central tragic character. Her encounter with Indian culture highlights cross-cultural friction and misunderstanding. Her personal narratives are written in diaries and interwoven with Indian experiences, foregrounding the cultural collisions between

Western individualism and Indian societal norms. Tharoor provides one such instance in the novel; She falls in love with the married man, Lakshan, and also suggests that they have opportunities in America to live happily. Whereas, in the Indian Hindu culture, marriage is sacrosanct and second marriage is not allowed; only in certain cases, a husband can take divorce from the wife. This interconnection between Priscilla's Western worldview and Lakshman's Indian identity offers cross-cultural exchanges. These encounters of interconnection also reshape personal and collective understandings of love, marriage, tradition, and modernity. Due to these narrative techniques and encounters, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* becomes not only a storyteller of communal violence but also a site for interrogating cultural binaries.

Searching for a Position of Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* in the place of World Literature

Despite cross-cultural and linguistic barriers, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* is of significant importance in discussions of world literature. The novel not only retains local character but also represents Indian social culture and political realities. On the other hand, the novel also involves foreign characters and their cultural realities. By showing these two cultures in a single frame, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* showcases both international and Indian issues. The narrative structure of the *Rashomon* effect and polyphony enhances readers' interest at the global level. This storytelling structure makes it familiar to international readers. Simultaneously, the novel focuses on the realities of Indian communal politics and involves foreign characters into this politics. This dual approach allows Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* to represent India to the world literature forum and global ways of understanding. In this way, Tharoor's novel becomes a mediator between the West and India. Consequently, the novel's postmodern narrative strategies of linearity and privileging multiple voices often challenge canonical forms. The novel's fragmented storytelling structure reflects the chaotic reality of communal violence and invites readers to actively interpret meaning from dissimilar textual fragments. The novel's polyvocal nature of lived experience, multicultural, politically charged

contexts give it a position as a part of world literature. Therefore, one can consider that this innovation may situate the novel within a broader literary tradition of world literature. Thus, Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* demonstrates a form of cross-cultural dialogue and perspectives, leading to surpass of individual cultural frameworks. The novel's polyphonic methodology, foregrounding multiple cultural insights and experiences, enriches the novel at the global literary practice without collapsing them into a singular worldview.

Significance of Polyphonic Storytelling and *Rashomon*

It is considered that polyphonic storytelling is important in the implementation of ethical aspects. The novel does not resolve contradictions and does not assign clear blame to anyone; it leaves a side in readers' minds, where it becomes their responsibility to interpret the climax in their own ways. The death of seven people out of eight; the reader may know how it happened, but Priscilla Hart's death is mysterious, which gives the reader a compulsion to interpret in their own way. The novel pushes readers to face uncertainty and to recognise the limits of their own viewpoints. This ethical position is significant in India, a nation known for its many forms of diversity. From ancient to modern times, Indian stories play a very crucial role in justifying ideological beliefs. This approach may correspond to modern world literature.

Conclusion

The present paper attempted to explore the narrative structure of polyphony and the *Rashomon* Effect in Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*. These narrative forms have become powerful examples of new storytelling in today's global literary scene. The novel compels readers to rethink the story from different perspectives, framing it as a space for encounters rather than focusing solely on resolutions. From the above discussion, one can conclude that Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*'s storytelling style reflects the shattering realities of postcolonial India. This technique highlights diversity, interaction, and cultural exchange, which place the novel

within the wider sphere of world literature. The story does not provide a fixed conclusion, but encourages readers to think critically and engage with the story in an interpretive and ethical way. The novel's narrative techniques of the *Rashomon* Effect and polyphony reflect the complexities and ambiguities of modern life. On the other hand, it presents literature as a cultural product with multiple perspectives and different stories, where these stories can come together, move in different ways, and create new possibilities of meaning.

The present research paper concludes that Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* is an example of polyphony and the *Rashomon* effect. These new narrative forms are important in the twenty-first century to redefine story in a cross-cultural context. Lakshman, Gurinder Singh, Prof. Mohmmad Sarwar, Priscilla Hart, Kadambari, and so on, characters make a significant contribution to the indigenous and Western values. The novel's story provides that these characters present different interpretations of history, religious traditions, and socio-political identity. This novel's characters' identities are not fixed or permanent but are shaped by conflicting narratives, views, and perspectives. These examinations reflect that postcolonial cultural memory and historical truth are constructed and represented through cultural entities like literature. Through polyphony and the *Rashomon*-effect structure, the novel questions the idea of a single and absolute truth. This narrative structure also highlights the complex relationship between culture, identity, and history. These narrative techniques create, challenge, and retell cultural identities over time. In this way, *Riot: A Novel* reflects the tensions and realities of a pluralistic society and also offers a vision of contemporary literature of the embracement of diversity and multiple human experiences.

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