Chapter V

AFTERWORD

The central concern in the texts discussed in the preceding chapters is communalism in the shape of the Ayodhya dispute leading to the Babri Masjid demolition, and its aftermath. The study of the three selected texts brings out certain similarities and differences in the representation of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid dispute and its various aspects. Seen in comparison with the factual details laid out in the introductory chapter, all these texts can be said to have borrowed from reality but to varying degrees. In Riot, Tharoor stays close to reality and his depiction of the various facets of the dispute is objective. He has been able to stay detached by successfully using an experimental narrative structure that allows for various narrators presenting their views. He has fictionalized only the pre-Babri Masjid demolition scenario, especially the riots following the Ram Sila Poojan of 1989. He has used the riots, which took away the life of an American girl in India, as a platform to present various contesting aspects of the history and politics of the dispute, packing his narrative with precise information.

Manju Kapur presents a wider view of the dispute in A Married Woman, covering the Ram Sila Poojan, the Rath Yatra, and the eventual demolition of the Babri Masjid. Avoiding details of the Sila Poojan and the Rath Yatra, she describes the demolition and its immediate effects in detail. The history of the dispute, too, is presented in bits and pieces. Kapur has tried to cover the whole dispute, without focusing on any one event. Some aspects of the historical episode are presented symbolically through the protagonist’s canvases, while others are entwined with the life of the characters. Kapur has avoided using direct allusions to real-life incidents in her presentation. Her presentation is more subdued and she has fictionalized names of political parties and politicians to avoid anything controversial. She owns in the text to have left out details because of the contemporary political relevance of the issue.

Hariharan’s In Times of Siege presents the post-Babri Masjid demolition scenario of intolerance and there are constant reverberations of the Ayodhya dispute and the Babri
Masjid demolition. The plot of the novel finds a close parallel in contemporary history. Hariharan, too, like Kapur, has stayed away from obvious factual references, but has dropped strong cues to draw similarities between her fictional world and the real. She emphasizes more on the politics of communalism, taking another controversial strand from history—the poet-reformer Basava. She sticks to facts in her portrayal of Basava. She compares various time-frames to bring out the common element of intolerance and denial of plurality, in the contemporary world, as well as in history. She unveils the face of fundamentalist forces in the country, booming ever since the Babri Masjid demolition.

All the novels have an interweaving of the Ayodhya dispute along with a fictional tale. Tharoor mingles the life and death of his protagonist with the riots in the wake of the Sila Poojan, but keeps the discussion of the history and politics of the dispute in separate sections. This compartmentalization lends the discussion objectivity. The Priscilla murder is used only as a metaphor to emphasize the import of the various perspectives presented on the Ayodhya dispute. On the other hand, Kapur’s novel weaves the events of the dispute and the life of her protagonist inseparably. In fact, the events of the Ayodhya conflict come up in the last two-third of the novel, before which no mention of them is made. The protagonist and the other characters are shown to be directly affected by the dispute and the violence it involves. Kapur’s presentation is emotional, rather than informative or argumentative. Hariharan includes the event of the Babri Masjid demolition only as a nightmarish sequence to the shocked protagonist. But the theme always stays close to the dispute as Hariharan compares Basava’s history and the controversy it creates to the conflict over the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid site. The narrative borrows its theme, but not the events from the Ayodhya dispute.

The novels under examination present the case for a history open to interpretations. Tharoor reiterates the multiplicity of perspectives dismissing any claims to a unique history. He openly suggests that there are always multiple perspectives, no single truth. Hariharan is of the same opinion. She makes a case for a pluralist history, denying any one historical account as authentic. History is multifaceted and presents a different face to each onlooker. Tharoor and Hariharan coincide on the view that there is an intermingling of history, myths, and legends in the accounts of the disputed site at Ayodhya, and this makes it difficult to reach any safe conclusion, without being biased. While Tharoor emphasizes his point by presenting multiple perspectives and leaving the
novel open-ended, suggesting heterogeneous possibilities, Hariharan asserts her point-of-view by making her protagonist take a firm stand to fight the fundamentalists for his version of history.

Manju Kapur shows that a macro event permeates the micro level; it affects individuals differently, facilitating each to have a different perspective of the issue. In addition to advocating multiple perspectives overtly, she shows it through her narrative. All her major characters react to the atmosphere of violence and intolerance around them differently. It can be said that although they use different techniques in the texts, all the three writers are similar in their views on history. Interestingly, each of the texts has a character of a liberal historian who advocates opening history to multiple perspectives and interpretations.

The study of the three novels presents a bleak view of contemporary Indian society, fighting with unbridled forces of communalism. The evidence is mounting that India is becoming a playground for the intolerant. Divisive politics has become more popular as politicians seek to slice and dice the electorate into ever-smaller configurations of caste, language and religion, finding it better to appeal to such particularist identities in the quest for votes. The selfish interests of politicians do not make allowances for assorted heterodoxies to prosper. All the three texts under study emphasize the role of politics in the Ayodhya dispute, and increasing communalism and intolerance as the result of the fundamentalists’ victory in demolishing the mosque.

The texts are similar in discussing religious fundamentalism and the riots that result from it. They show that divisions in society in the name of narrow religious identities make place for differences to prosper. Hatred is mindless and violence does not differentiate between religions. The texts coincide in showing that the riots in the wake of Ayodhya dispute have taken hundreds of lives over the years, and still counting.

A common issue in the novels is the debate between communalism and secularism. The cause of much dispute is the ambiguity in the term ‘secularism’. The fundamentalists in each of the novels denounce the secularists and interpret secularism as the opposite of ‘Hindutva’. Secularism is, in fact, a part of a more comprehensive idea – that of India as an integrally pluralist country, made up of different religious beliefs,
distinct language groups, divergent social practices. Secularism is one aspect – a very important one – for the recognition of that larger idea of heterogeneous identity. This is what Tharoor supports; he stresses the plural tradition of India, which embraces differences.

This study began with a reference to the various inputs of contemporary critical theorists on history. Although, thinkers like Carr, White, Levi-Strauss, and Foucault hail from different backgrounds and cultures, they seem unanimous in their concept of history as multifaceted and pluralist. According to them, there is no single truth in history. It may be interpreted in various ways, depending on who is recording the ‘facts’. This is where subjectivities enter a narrative which may have its roots in reality but poses different aspects to the onlookers.

Further, history is never static; it changes not only with the historian/narrator but also with the passage of time. This is the main crux of the three novels analyzed in the present study. As narratives, Riot, A Married Woman, and In Times of Siege are very different from each other, but all three texts subscribe to a similar underlying ideology – that the dividing line between reality and fiction is thin.