Chapter-IV

Exploring Culture in Unnatural Times: Riot

Riot, published in 2001, is the third novel of Shashi Tharoor which surfaces on the literary scene as a dexterously and intricately designed expressive piece of fiction. Meditating upon India’s socio-cultural values and conflicts, and political uncertainties, the novel not only emerges as an earnest quest to comprehend the sub-continent encumbered by her labyrinthine issues, but also highlights the universal implications of post-colonial society of the nation. Besides its social implications discussed in detail, Riot also emerges as a fictional critique by a diasporic author, representing the communal unrest of the Indian society. Having already dealt with a similar theme in The Great Indian Novel, Tharoor reveals the annoying hatred between the Hindus and the Muslims of independent India by exquisitely amalgamating communal differences with other issues in Riot. With the backdrop of the Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue, the novel is an attempt to examine the reasons behind the persisting communal resentments between the Hindus and the Muslims as well as the genesis of the problem termed as the Ram Janmabhoomi - Babri Masjid dispute. Tharoor gives an unbiased expression to the feelings of both the Hindus and the Muslims in Riot through Ram Charan Gupta, a leader and religious activist, and the latter through Mohammed Sarwar, a Reader in the History Department of Delhi University.

In his novel Riot Shashi Tharoor portrays multiplicity of themes and conflicts – of people, attitudes, philosophies, religions, loves, hatred, race and gender issues in a different and new way and gives it an organic shape. Ramlal observes: “Tharoor’s quest for novelty continues in Riot, a love story set in recent troubled times of communal tensions in India. . . . Tharoor presents his characters with sensitivity and understanding, deftly bringing out
the complications of a multicultural society”(141). Padmavati Vasantrao Phutane finds
and underscores the same concern but in a different way: “Shashi Tharoor’s Riot (2001) is
a novel about the history, love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism and the
impossibility of knowing the truth. Riot narrates the story through journal entries,
interviews, letters, scrapbooks, newspaper clippings, extracts from personal diaries, and
cconversations. He brings conflicts and sense of nationalism in the novel”. Sharma and
Roy observe:

Shashi Tharoor’s works normally resound with rhetoric of multiple socio-
cultural affairs. Riot is also not an exception to the rule. In fact, Riot
‘confirms Shashi Tharoor as a major voice in contemporary literature’
(Elie Wiesel). Some of the great reviewers appreciate its concern with the
multiple kinds of social, political and cultural affairs in varying degrees.

Shobori Ganguli finds it touching a rather raw nerve of contemporary
Indian Politics. Adam Goodheart considers it as “a basic parable of the
modern world, with its random human encounters, clashes of cultures and
garbles international communiqués. (01)

The novel was published in the wake of the ‘Hindutva’ forces struggling to reclaim their
identity. This struggle for reclaiming identity provoked communal riots all over the
country resulting into senseless killing. Amidst this highly volatile and violent spectrum
of the contemporary period, Tharoor dared to publish his novel dealing with a highly
controversial issue. This novel was published with two different covers; the one for
Indian readers which had a picture of riot on it whereas the other one for the Western
readers having the Taj Mahal with subtitle- Riot: A Love Story. The novelist obviously
has two different sets of audience for the same story. He also reveals the East-West
encounter through a love story, albiet a tragic one, which results in the death of Priscilla -
the American. The background of the Taj for riot also evokes images of the Moghul
dynastic rule in India whereas the cover page that depicts an actual riot serves to the
reading audience of the negativity of hate. Tharoor takes on the role of a social
commentator when he creates awareness of the plight, oppression, suppression and
atrocities on women and many loopholes in our society.

Divided into eighty sections of varying lengths, *Riot* lacks any grand narrative and is
made up of fragmented, petite narratives. Disjunctiveness and a lack of cohesiveness
constantly pervade the novel. This fragmented writing which is characteristic of
postmodern writing highlights myriad issues concerning individuals, cultures, ideologies,
religions and their collisions. Thus *Riot* emerges as a conglomeration of diverse points of
view. These views expressed through fragments of narratives possess an astonishing
variety and are placed by the author before the reader in the form of a puzzle that the
latter unravels giving coherence to the whole. Consequently, the universally
acknowledged omniscient narrator’s role, as was the case in *The Great Indian Novel*, is
entirely undermined here reinforcing the views held by one of its own characters who
states: “I’ve read about this chap who’s just reinvented the Mahabharata as a twentieth-
century story – epic style, oral tradition, narrative digressions, the lot. No, what I mean is,
why can’t I write a novel that reads like – like an encyclopedia? . . . Down with the
omniscient narrator! It’s time for the omniscient reader” (Tharoor, *RT* 135-136).

Putting an ocular difference between *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor
writes: “*The Great Indian Novel* took an epic sweep across the entire political history of
twentieth-century India while reinventing the *Mahabharata* in the same breath, while *Riot*
seeks to examine some of the most vital issues of our day on a smaller, more intimate
canvas” (BIB 37).
While some of these issues can be perceived as characteristically sub-continental, others possess a global credence. Unfolding complex questions about the personal, social and communal politics of the quintessential small town of Zalilgarh in Northern India, Riot skims through the anguish of isolation and the social mores of the Indian society. A poignant tale of love and betrayal, it is exquisitely coloured by the political scenario of the sub-continent, accompanied by the fanaticism on which it thrives, and the consequent sufferings of her people. In fact, in reading Riot, one actually encounters a veritable riot of ideas, beliefs, moods, styles and perspectives that merge into a larger rubric stretching across two antipodal, culturally disparate continents, individuals and predicaments.

India is a multi-racial, multi-caste, multi-lingual country and enormous atrocities have been perpetrated on the people under the guise of caste and religion.

The quest to understand India is the 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 systems, 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 swallow her up. Riots prove that cultural collisions can be severe manifestations of danger and destruction.

Pluralism is not a common but a unique and inevitable phenomenon of Indian culture which is a key concept in order to understand the country and its rich cultural heritage. Actually, diversity and plurality expose the cultural spirit of the country in its toto.
Highlighting the diverse nature of Indian Culture and articulating his faith in diversity and pluralism Tharoor writes:

That Indian mind has been shaped by remarkably diverse forces: ancient Hindu tradition, myth and scripture; the impact of Islam and Christianity; and two centuries of British colonial rule. The result is unique. Many observers have been astonished by India’s survival as a pluralist state. But India could hardly have survived as anything else. Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India’s geography and reaffirmed by its history. (*BIB* 97)

Choosing the metaphor of traditional Indian music, he reiterates the same idea, a little later, on the same page:

With diversity emerging from its geography and inscribed in its history, India was made for pluralist democracy. It is not surprising, then, that the political life of modern India has been rather like traditional Indian music: the broad basic rules are firmly set, but within them one is free to improvise, unshackled by a written score. The music of India is the collective anthem of a hybrid civilization. (*BIB* 97-98)

India is also a nation of many different communities and hence a challenge for India and Indian society to make and sustain a proper communal harmony among them. Communalism is actually a psychological human problem. In India, the hostility is mainly between religio-cultural communities. The problem of communalism has been addressed by several Indian English novelists. It is one of the predominant thematic concerns of Indian English fiction dealing primarily with partition narratives, which highlights the communalism of Hindus and Muslims. In Indian novels communal violence finds expressions in heart-rending descriptions as ‘the ghost train’ in *Train to Pakistan* and
tales of human misery. Communalism is a reality which we are forced to face but which we wish to forget. In India, the communal conflict is basically bi-cultural between Hindus and Muslims and results in gruesome spectacle of contemporary history and culture. It is true that there have been other forms of communalism, as with Sikhs and Christians but the battle forces are drawn between Hindus on the one hand and Muslims on the other. One of the functions of Indian English literature is to portray and reflect this gruesome social reality.

Illustrating a profound concern for diverse socio-political concerns of the Indian subcontinent, *Riot* is set amidst the vicious, sectarian clashes in North India in 1989. It is the story of a twenty four year old New York University doctoral candidate Pricilla Hart, visiting the small town of Zalilgarh in North India as a volunteer with the population control organization HELP-US. Details about her commitment to help the local women of Zalilgarh and her passionate affair with the District Magistrate, followed by her untimely and mysterious death, a few days before she was due to return home, form the crux of the story. A few days after Priscilla’s murder, her parents—Katharine and Rudyard Hart--visit India together in search of answers to their queries regarding their daughter’s mysterious and sudden end. However, despite their sincere and consistent efforts, the Harts are forced to return unsatisfied simply surmising that Priscilla’s fatal end had many deliberate and political reasons behind it such as the local resentment against her work with the abused women in Zalilgarh, and her clandestine affair with the already married District Magistrate of the town.

The novel is a powerful statement on the essence of the Indian society and its ethos, bearing testimony to the profound intimacy that the author shares with India and her people. Unlike his earlier novels, *Riot* is not a satirical work. He addresses innumerable
concerns and issues confronting contemporary India in the novel. He is right when he confesses that *Riot*, like all his books, is about his personal exploration of India:

My eight books have all, in different ways, been about my personal exploration of India, of the forces that have made and unmade it, of the historical and philosophical traditions that have shaped the Indian identity. While this is explicit in my four books of non-fiction, my fiction has also sought to explore the Indian condition, particularly by looking at the kinds of stories Indians tell about themselves (whether the stories of our epics and of our nationalist struggle, as in *The Great Indian Novel*, or the stories of our popular cinema, in *Show Business*, or the stories of the identities and histories we construct for ourselves, as in *Riot*). In all three novels, though each is very different from the other two, it is true to say that the architecture of the book speaks of an India of multiple stories, multiple perspectives, multiple tellers, multiple truths. (*BIB* 228-229)

The novel moves deep down to the cause and then explores the various implications that India has experienced in the past fifty years because of it. It carries within it historical, social, political and literary aspects which truly make it an Indian English Novel giving us a thorough insight and understanding of India and the communal problems it is facing. Primarily, the novel revolves around the story of an American volunteer Priscilla Hart, who is in Zalilgarh, a small district from Uttar Pradesh, working with the non-governmental association HELP-US. Priscilla Hart is a 24 year old, slim blond blue eyed American who is involved in developing awareness among females about population control. Her father’s job had brought her to India when she was fifteen. The only Indians she comes across during this period are the servants, the lower class with all its poverty, the bazaars, the movies, the temples and the mosques. She works actively for the social
service league, reads to the blind children, helps at the Catholic orphanage and cares for
the underside of this society’. But during this stay an incident changes her life; one
afternoon she finds her father in bed with his secretary Nandini, ultimately leading
towards a divorce between Rudyard and Katharine. Priscilla cannot forgive her father for
this: “But I cannot forgive him. Not just for doing what he did, hurting Mom, destroying
the family I’d always taken for granted. But also for being careless enough and
thoughtless enough to do it there, in Mom’s and his bed, on that afternoon and letting me
find him. I hated finding him like that . . . it was awful” (RT 79).

After 9 years Priscilla is back to India to work in Zalilgarh, a district town in Uttar
Pradesh. Apparently nothing in India has changed during this period, except the increase
in population. Zalilgarh comes alive in her poem ‘Christmas in Zalilgarh’. The poem
penned by her in her scrap book on 25th December 1988, describes Zalilgarh as town with
mist of dust, cow dung sidewalks, rusting tin roofs, walls with red betel stains and angry
black slogans with dirty brown men in their dirty dhotis and – “sad-eyed women clad in
gaily colored saris, clutching babies, baskets, burdens too heavy for their undernourished
bodies” (15).

The novel begins with the series of ‘spoof columns’ in the New York Times, reporting the
murder of an American girl Priscilla Hart in the North Indian town of Zalilgarh, to be
followed by excerpts from personal diaries, letters, journals and interviews. It compares
and contrasts the occidental and the oriental societies rekindling the memories of a
colonized India or rather of any erstwhile colony. Juxtaposing the “blacks’ and the
‘whites’ belonging to the contemporary postcolonial times in the novel, Tharoor
effectively portrays the divergent attitudes and thought processes of not only those once
colonized, but also of the people belonging to the western world of the colonizers,
decades after the end of colonialism. These two antipodal societies and cultures
(colonizers and colonized) are represented by Priscilla Hart and V. Lakshman, respectively, in the novel, and through them the novelists dwell upon the continuity of racial differences despite the official end of colonialism from the face of this globe.

Besides discussing her love life in the letters, Priscilla in her letters to Cindy also deliberates upon the contemporary social issues of the Indian society. Issues such as women empowerment, the lives of the poor, the bureaucratic system, belligerence between the Hindu and the Muslim fanatics and also her experiences at work that force her to remark, “Population-control’ awareness seems more of a misnomer to me . . . . Being forced to have babies is just one more form of oppression of subjugation by men.” find expression in these letters” (171).

Tharoor has also used a random but meticulous representation of the story with the help of transcripts from the journals written by Lakshman. These excerpts not only mirror his personality, his likes, dislikes and obsessions in life but also express his passionate love for Priscilla and his deliberations upon his married life and family. Unaware of the fact that despite being ‘Lakshman’ himself with a six year old daughter called ‘Rekha’, he had crossed his own ‘Lakshman-Rekha’, he forsakes his morals, his scruples and his principles simply to seek excitement in the love he receives from an American girl whom he ultimately betrays. The novelist portrays the dilemmas that Lakshman persistently experiences both in his interior monologues as well as in his conversations with Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police, and Priscilla herself. With emotions vacillating between a young foreigner’s love, having no obligations--personal or professional--and the love of a six year old daughter and her mother, not to speak of the obligations of his profession, Lakshman undergoes an emotional and psychological turbulence. A helpless slave to his passionate desires, he finds himself incapable to remain sincere to his faithful wife and loving child. Although guilty, he indulges in the immoral act repeatedly and
even considers abandoning his world in India so as to go to America with Priscilla. It is this ebb and flow of his thoughts and emotions that Tharoor exquisitely portrays in the excerpts and poems from his journals.

Randy Diggs’s notebook is also used by Tharoor to give an unbiased account of the story. During his sojourn at Zalilgarh, Diggs with the intention of gaining more information about the riot meets Ram Charan Gupta, the local Hindu leader, and Professor Sarwar, a Muslim historian. He further meets Lakshman, the District Magistrate and Gurinder Singh, the Superintendent of Police of Zalilgarh. The conversations recorded by him in his notebook are adequate clues to the simmering hostility between the Hindus and the Muslims and the bureaucratic attitude towards the communal problems in India.

Further excerpts from Katharine Hart’s diary reveal the doubts that she has regarding her daughter’s death, which is considered to be a consequence of a communal riot. Although she is never able to know the truth about Priscilla’s murder, as she is only aware of the official account, yet having talked to Lakshman she senses Priscilla’s relations with him.

Another pertinent account that one finds in her diary is the account of the local hospital of Zalilgarh, where she met Kadambari’s sister, suffering from major burns.

Shashi Tharoor himself has confessed in many of his interviews that the novel is full of collisions of various sorts -- personal, political, emotional and violent. This major voice has tried to solve different kinds of global problems as a senior official of the UN for more than two decades. Besides, he has searched the way-out of pacifying communalism and violence plaguing Indian society to a great extent. Naturally, this novel discusses various types of conflicts between individuals, between cultures, between ideologies and between religions.

Tharoor visualises the narrow parameters of a murder of an American onto a much broader canvas and portrays the all too fragile communal relations prevailing in the
Indian society through a sub-plot in the novel. While introducing his readers to those close to his protagonist and her work, he reveals the diverse yet essential features of the human society and brings to light the communal belligerence and religious intolerance plaguing it. Narrating the story of Riot with sensitivity and exhibiting a restrained dignity in his understatement of personal and national dilemmas, Tharoor gives a subtle but cogent reminder of the remnants of colonialism that have made a niche for themselves in the sub-continental mentality even during the postcolonial times. Further, a close analysis of the book from the postmodern perspective shows that instead of simply echoing traditional Riot, it is a vivid exemplification of a ‘pluralistic text’ which does not confine itself to a simple yet profound meaning, but owing to its ‘polysemic’ nature, possesses the potential to be read a number of times. Though Riot is less allegorical than his previous works viz. The Great Indian Novel and Show Business, yet one cannot ignore the fact that by writing it Tharoor has explicitly fulfilled his commitment to do something new each time.

Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Novel is again an exploration of India. No doubt India is a complex country which contains multiplicity and plurality in it and can survive and sustain only through plurality and diversity. But sometimes the plural society of India also brings some vital questions and challenges. Communal riot is one of them. But even after these challenges we celebrate the commonality of differences. How do you understand a country whose population is about forty percent illiterate but which has produced the world’s largest pool of trained scientists and engineers? How do you cover the poverty and squalor of a land that led a Mughal emperor to declaim: “If on earth there be paradise of bliss, it is this, it is this, it is this”? Everything you write as the truth, I can show you the opposite is also true. You come from a country, Mr. Diggs, where everything is black and white, there are good guys and bad guys, cowboys and red Indians. You can only
understand India on your own terms, and you do not understand that your terms do not apply here” (231).

Tharoor has discussed at length the social, economical, political, racial, global and cultural outlook of India with all its statistical figures and incidents of the part. Tharoor has used the riot to write a different kind of novel, one that focuses on collision between religious individuals, cultural and ideologies. We are prisoners of constructions that we have made in our mind, sometimes we are prisoners of real or perceived social and political pressures, some time we are prisoners of our own created ambitions and world which push us towards chaos. Tharoor knows that he is writing a novel of ideas, dealing with the construction of identity and memory of a history which is never really one history but just a different perspective on the part. The immense complexities are created when one is intruding into someone else’s story. It is not important what we share but one can never ignore what is different. Religious hatred is the book’s ke concern. How we hate and why, how we build things up in our minds to justify the hatred, jealously and bitterness of revenge, keep the story on the crest of an emotional wave with the death of Priscilla Hart.

Novel for Tharoor implies ‘giving something new’. In Riot he has told the story through newspaper clippings, diary entries, interviews, transcripts, journals, scrapbooks, even poems written by the characters – in other words, using a dozen different voices, different stylistic forms, for different fragments of the story: “Riot is also a book you can read in any order: though ideally you should read it from beginning to end, you can pick it up from any chapter, go back or forward to any other chapter, and you will bring a different level of awareness to the story. In so doing, you would re-create my text as your own” (BIB 231).
Priscilla plans to leave India after meeting Lakshman for the last time at Kotli. Her last visit to Kotli, to meet Lakshman, proves fatal. This relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla presents the existing hypocrisy in the marriage institution. Lakshman is traditionally married to Geetha who finds out her husband’s affair and helplessly turns to God. She visits the Shiv Mandir, on every Saturday where a Swamiji resides. To resolve this problem she speaks to Swamji: “What can I do, Swamiji? I cannot talk to him about this it would kill me if I had to tell him what I knew! I can only turn to God, Swamiji, and to you” (RT 227).

Through Geetha, Tharoor opens up a vista of every residing superstitious attitude of a traditional wife. She is ready to do anything to protect her family. She does nothing, but expects a lot from God and Swamiji. She is ready to pay any amount for it: “Please conduct a special puja for me to help me keep my husband! . . . . Use tantra, do the tandava, use anyone and anything you want, Swamiji, but please don’t let this foreign devil-woman run away with my husband . . . .” (227).

It sounds quite anomalous but this has been and still is a response of Indian women, however and how much educated she may be. She always finds solace in shifting the responsibility of getting her problems solved by god or a Swami. On the other side is Priscilla, who is very eager to create her world with Lakshman, with an uncaring attitude about his background: “I don’t care about your background . . . . I love you. Not your family, not your village, not your caste, not your background. I love you. And that’s all that matters to me” (89).

Thus to a great extent, Geeta M. Patil appears justified in saying that, “his writing records a seismograph of pressures and tremors that our society is facing at the moment” (100).

If we take some other perspective of the story, Priscilla wants the man in spite of all odds, such as in spite of his married status and being a proud father of a daughter. All these
details simply do not carry any meaning for her and she tells Lakshman: “I don’t care about your background . . . I love you” (RT 89).

In fact, several topics that are generally taken as taboos, like extra-marital affairs etc in Indian culture, do not even cause Priscilla to raise her eyebrow. To illustrate, she perceives sex as a means of expressing love to the man she loves. So she is totally unfazed by the fact that she has already enjoyed several dates and sexual encounters with Lakshman: “The sex was just a means of expressing my love, a way of giving myself to the man I loved. I’m not sure that he ever understood the difference” (242).

Throughout his writings Tharoor keeps on repeating the idea of all-inclusive quality of Indian pluralism. Given the enormous challenges of India’s ethnic, religious and linguistic diversities, only an all-inclusive pluralism will guarantee the survival and success of the Indian nation:

The whole point of Indianness is its pluralism: you can be many things and one thing. You can be a good Muslim, a good Keralite and a good Indian all at one. To borrow Michael Ignatieff’s famous phrase, we are a land of belonging rather than of blood.

If America is a melting pot, then to me India is a thali, a selection of sumptuous dishes in different bowls. Each tastes different and does not necessarily mix with the next, but they belong together on the same plate, and they complement each other in making the meal a satisfying repast.

That idea of India is of one land embracing many. It is idea that a nation may endure difference of caste, creed, colour, conviction, culture, cuisine, costume and custom, and still rally around a consensus. And that consensus is about the simple idea that in a democracy you don’t really
need to agree-except on the ground rules of how you will disagree.

(TETTTC 61-62)

Thus Tharoor reflects at length on the pluralism in Indian kaleidoscopic culture that consists of a continuous play of history, culture and power. Highlighting his deep faith in democracy and pluralism G. Rai observes: “The novel shows that Shashi tharoor has full faith in the democracy, diversity and pluralism which are the basic principles of Indian nationalism. Fundamentalism obviously threatens to destroy India’s secular fabric. India has resilience as a nation” (51).

Tharoor deliberately chooses a non-Indian character to portray a scene of riot in India and simultaneously it provides him an opportunity to choose English language for his expression. As he avers: “In Riot, for the first time, I had major non-Indian characters, Americans as it happens, and that was bound to influence the way the book is perceived both in America and in India. Inevitably the English Language fundamentally affects the content of each book, but it does not determine the audience of the writer; as long as translations exist, language is a vehicle, not a destination” (BIB 234).

Geeta M. Patil too echoes the same when she observes: “In Riot: A Novel for the first time Tharoor has major non-Indian characters, who are bound to influence the way the book is perceived both in U.S. and India” (79).

In this way Tharoor explores several issues of India through Priscilla Hart and Rudyard Hart and to a large extent Randy Diggs. But the question that strikes the readers is why a ‘Foreigner’ to explore India. Tharoor, in an interview, defends himself: “Because very often we define ourselves in relation to others and because a foreigner comes with a certain level of both innocence and a lack of understanding that helps illuminate for those who are trying to read a story like this” (qtd. in Patil 79).
Thus Tharoor shows how diversity and pluralism are the main forces of India. It is the cornerstone of Indian Culture. The idea of secularism and its practice in India has also attracted Throor’s attention. He insists that in India the concept of secularism is not an absence of religions but the presence of religious pluralism. He focuses on religion, on how the secularization of religion in India means religious pluralism rather than religious absence. He is committed to promote pluralism in everything: “And for that we must promote pluralism. To strike a personal note, my own faith in religious pluralism is a legacy of my upbringing in secular India. Secularism in India did not mean irreligiousness . . . . Rather, secularism meant, in the Indian tradition, a profusion of religions, none of which was privileged by the state” *(BIB 222)*.

Western 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 throughout the decades after Independence, the political culture reflects these “secular” assumptions and attitudes. Though 82% of Indian population is Hindu, as already stated, and though Hindu-Muslim riots sometimes break out in India because of religious fanatics, two of India’s first five Presidents were Muslims, so were innumerable Governors, Ministers 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.

Through the voices of Ram Charan Gupta, Mohammed Sarwar and Lakshman, Shashi Tharoor has very strongly traced the upheavals in the Hindu-Muslim relationship. He is more concerned about the development of religious sense with a political outlook that is taking hold of the country. Here we find echoes of *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* where Tharoor speaks on religion, secularism and Hinduism in his fiction. It
is the political communalization that has been illumined with the help of these characters. The intense Hindu zeal of Ram Charan Gupta surprises us and raises a question of where the country will be leading. The aggressive defence of the Muslim community has added more problems to the existing situation. The Hindu dogmas that Lakshman expresses are on the verge of becoming extinct. What India needs now is the kind of ‘secularism’ that Lakshman accepts. These classes of ideals have led to chaos in the country. The reverberations of these are clearly visible in society. The widening rift between these two communities is a major cause in creating social instability; Tharoor is more concerned about this for he finds it odd that when the world is moving towards globalization, he finds his country struggling to solve the identity crisis. The social vista is explored through the eyes of Priscilla, Diggs, Shankar Das. It is through them, Tharoor places the social exploitation of women. Shanker Das, Kadmbari have enabled themselves to explore these conditions through their project HELP-US.

The present analysis of a few pages clearly demonstrates that Tharoor's deep faith in India’s diversity and plurality is the main force behind all his writings which is a unique phenomenon and the greatest source of inspiration to him which provokes his imagination and, simultaneously, keeps on guiding him. The exploration of multiple aspects of India through many characters makes the novel essentially a polyphonic text. Riot portrays different types of conflict--of people, attitudes, philosophies, religions, loves and hatreds. Therefore, it was difficult to have just one point of view and naturally, a multitude of narrators was needed to have, presumably, different points of view. Some examples will make this idea clear. Ram Charan Gupta is an extremist firebrand Hindu who feels that even the Taj Mahal is actually a Hindu temple. Prof Sarwar believes in India's pluralism but, by no means, he is a representative of the majority of Muslim opinion.
It is through Md. Sarwar, a historian, that Tharoor expresses the views of Muslim community and their dream image of a secular India. Amidst the Mandir Masjid communal tempo Md. Sarwar recites the speech of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad which he had delivered as the President of the Indian National Congress at Ramgarh in 1940. He considers this speech as the greatest testament of the faith of a religious Muslim in a united India. Through this speech he had voiced the sentiments of every Muslim and asserted India as their homeland: “I am a Musalman and proud of the fact . . . I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality . . . . I am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India” (RT 108).

The freedom struggle which asserted the feeling of Indian-ness was taken in terms of a national entity without imagining the formation of Pakistan. But along with freedom came the partition which shattered this national entity. The entire Muslim community was held responsible for this. With his entire defence Md. Sarwar accuses those who motivated this two nation theory: “Muslim’s didn’t partition the country--the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did. There are more Muslims in India today than in Pakistan” (111).

The Muslims who affirmed Islam’s claim on this soil and had been residing in India for the past eleven centuries spreading the message of human equality suffered discrimination after partition. They were now strangers who owed loyalty to a different religion. The question that haunts this intellectual Muslim Md.Sarwar is: “Where do Indian Muslims like myself fit in? I have spent my life thinking of myself as a part of “us”-- now there are Indians, respectable Indians, Indians winning votes, who say that I am really “them”.


But I’m determined to resist this minority complex that the Hindu chauvinists want to impose upon me and others like me” (114).

What hurts him more is that he is forced to suffer for what he has not done. It is the revenge taken on him for what his ancestors had done in the past. The humiliation of being thrown away from the mainstream gives rise to insecurity. Now he visualizes a change in the dominant ethos of the country and in the attitude towards them. With the ongoing agitations on the Ramjanmbhoomi Babri Masjid issue, it appears to him, as if history is going to repeat itself: “The whole point is that historians like myself, who haven’t sold our souls to either side in this wretched ongoing communal argument, have a duty to dig into the myths that divide and unite our people. The Hindutva brigade is busy trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs they want to right, dredging up “evidence” of Muslim malfeasance and misappropriation of national glory. They are making us in to a large scale Pakistan; they are vindicating the two-nation theory” (67).

Instead of all this Professor Mohammad Sarwar loves his country because it has taught him the lesson of “tolerance and inclusiveness” (108) and, simultaneously, has shaped his personality: “I love this country. I love it not just because I was born here, as my father and mother were, as their parents before them were, not just because their graves have mingled their bones into the soil of this land. I love it because I know it, I have studied its history, I have travelled its geography, I have breathed its polluted air, I have written words to its music. India shaped me, my mind, my tastes, my friendships, my passions”(112).

And a little later almost on the same pages Tharoor speaks through the mouth of Professor Sarwar regarding the real notion of Indianiness: “For my sons, the only possible idea of India is that of a nation than the sum of its parts. An India neither Hindu nor
Muslim, but both. This is the only India that will allow them to continue to call themselves Indians” (116).

The intensity of this insecurity, fear, increased when the Bhartiya Janta Party and its Hindutva allies raised the Mandir-Masjid issue. It was a communal movement which was motivated politically to reap the benefits of the Hindu vote bank. Provoking the Hindus, by reminding them of the humiliation they suffered in the past, this movement tried to ignite a spark which they thought had been stamped.

Ram Charan Gupta, the Hindu protagonist, with his Hindu ideology makes us familiar with the intense zeal of Hindutva. For him the awakening of the Hindus was essential to illuminate India, which had been continuously invaded and destroyed by the Muslim rulers of the past. Gupta considers that the demolition of temples in the past was a deliberately adapted imperial strategy to demoralize and humiliate the Hindus. He also holds this sect responsible for the partition of ‘his motherland’. For him this is ‘his motherland’ whereas the Muslims are intruders not owing their loyalty to this land: “But these Muslims are evil people, Mr. Diggs. You have to understand their mentality. They are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam, than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they all descended from conquerors from Arabic or Persia or Samarkand. Fine--if that is so, let them go back to these places! Why do they stay here if they will not assimilate into our country?” (54). According to him Ram Janmsthan is more a matter of faith and not of a western science: “It has been known for thousands of years that, that is the Ramjanmsthan the exact place of birth of our Lord Ram” (120). For Md. Sarwar, a historian, this is simply ridiculous: “Your Hindutva types are presuming to know the exact place of birth of a man whose birth date is historically unverifiable . . . . There is no
evidence for the historicity of the Ramjanmbhoomi claims. Again, does that matter?” (181-183).

Gupta gets disturbed with the pampering of this community when privileges are bestowed by providing financial aid to visit Haj and the Government subsidies to Muslim educational institutions. But what troubles him most is that, “They have even managed special status for the only Muslim-majority state we have, Kashmir. Do you know a Hindu from anywhere else in the country cannot buy a piece of land in Kashmir?! And worst of all these Muslims are outbreeding the Hindus” (55).

The Mandir-Masjid issue triggered the suppressed hatred against each other. The resistance that the Hindus faced for the construction of Mandir challenged their tolerance whereas the Muslims considered this as an attempt to wipe off their existence from this land. The slogan of ‘unity in diversity’ was now replaced by venomous slogans against each other. To bolster the courage of Hindus come the provocation “Jis Hindu ka khoon na khaule/ khoon nahi hai pani hai”. The Muslims were abused, taunted and goaded by the slogan “Musalman ke do hi sthan/ Pakistan ya kabristhan”. With the same gust came the reply “Has ke liya tha Pakistan/ ladke lenge Hindustan.”

From warmth to waging words and from waging words to weapons, this ended up into riot. The world witnessed what happened on December 6, 1992. It also saw and heard that thousands, both Hindus and Muslims, were killed and massacred in the riots that followed across the country. It was the worst outburst of communal violence in India since partition. Before the wounds of Partition were healed completely, a new scar was inflicted.

Amidst these struggles for imposing supremacy the rising smokes, hues and cries, Tharoor impeccably reminds us of a secular India when he writes: “Since the days of
Gandhi, we have tried to build a country that is every one’s and no one’s, a country that excludes nobody, a country that no one group can claim is exclusively theirs” (197).

Hinduism to Tharoor is a way of containing diversity and to sustain pluralism in a unique way. To him, it is also a religion without fundamentals. It has its deep roots in Indian Culture and society. He very openly declares himself as a believing Hindu but he is also quick to explain the phrase to a large extent. Tharoor writes of his belief regarding Hinduism: “Actually, it’s a bit odd to speak of “Hindu Fundamentalism,” because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: on organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred books. The name itself denotes something less, and more, than a set of theoretical beliefs. In many languages – French and Persian amongst them – the word for “Indian” is “Hindu.” Originally “Hindu” simply meant the people beyond the river Sindhu, or Indus. But the Indus is now in Islamic Pakistan; and to make matters worse, the word “Hindu” did not exist in any Indian language till its use by foreigners gave Indians a term for self-definition: ““Hinduism” is the name others applied to the indigenous religion of India, which many Hindus simply call Sanatan Dharma, the eternal faith. It embraces an eclectic range of doctrines and practices, from pantheism to agnosticism and from faith in reincarnation to belief in the caste system. But none of these constitutes an obligatory credo for a Hindu: there are none” (143). A bit further he openly declares himself as a believing Hindu as well as underlines its prominent features:

I am happy to describe myself as a believing Hindu, not just because it is the faith into which I was born, but for a string of other reasons, though requires no reason. One is cultural: as a Hindu I belong to a faith that expresses the ancient genius of my own people. Another is, for lack of a better phrase, its intellectual “fit”: I am more comfortable with the belief
structures of Hinduism than I would be with those of the other faiths of which I know. As a Hindu I claim adherence to a religion without an established church or priestly papacy, a religion whose rituals and customs I am free to reject, a religion that does not oblige me to demonstrate my faith by any visible sign, by subsuming many identity in any collectivity, not even by a specific day or time or frequency of worship. There is no Hindu Pope, no Hindu Sunday. As a Hindu I subscribe to a creed that is free of the restrictive dogmas of holy writ that refuses to be shackled to the limitations of a single holy book.

Above all, as a Hindu I belong to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion . . . . Hinduism, however, asserts that all ways of belief are equally valid, and Hindus readily venerate the saints, and the sacred objects, of other faiths. There is no such thing as Hindu heresy.

How can such a religion lend itself to “fundamentalism”? . . . . To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavors from many sources that we cannot easily identify . . . . Large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. (144-145)

He takes inspiration and pride in diversity and openness of Hinduism and speaks vigorously and rigorously about it:

I am proud of my Hinduism. I take pride in its diversity, in its openness, in religious freedom. When that great Hindu monk Swami Vivekananda electrified the world Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1983, he said
he was proud of Hinduism’s acceptance of all religions as true: of the refuge given to Jews and Zoroastrians when they were persecuted elsewhere. And he quoted an ancient Hindu hymn: “As the different streams having their sources in different places all mingle their water in the sea, so, O lord, the different oaths which men take . . . all lead to thee.” My own father taught me the Vedic sloka “Aa no bhadrah kratvo yantu vishwatah” – “Let noble thoughts come to us from all directions of the universe.” Every schoolchild knows the motto “Ekam sad viprah bahuda vadanti” – “Truth is one, the sages give it various names.” Isn’t this all-embracing doctrine worth being proud of” (146-147)

Tharoor sees religion as the centre of Indian Culture and, simultaneously, it reflects our pluralism:

Religion lies at the heart of Indian culture, but not necessarily as a source of division; religious myths like the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide a common idiom, a shared matrix of reference, to all Indians, and it was not surprising that when Doordarshan broadcast a fifty-two-episode serialization of the Mahabharata, the script was written by a Muslim, Dr Rahi Masoom Raza. Hinduism and Islam are intertwined in India; both religions, after all, have shared the history in the same space, and theirs is a cohabitation of necessity as well as fact. (TETTTC 70-71)

Thus he proves his point with a striking example. In this way he considers Hinduism more as a culture rather than as a religion: “It is possible to a great extent to speak of Hinduism as culture rather than as religion” (TETTTC 71-72).

This is sufficient to prove why Tharoor celebrates diversity and plurality in all his writings. Of course he takes pride in openness and diversity: “I take pride in the openness,
the diversity, the range, the lofty metaphysical aspirations of the Vedanta. I cherish the
diversity the lack of compulsion and the richness of the various ways in which Hinduism
is practised eclectically. And I admire the civilizational heritage of tolerance that made
Hindu societies open their arms to people of every other faith, to come and practise their
beliefs in peace amid Hindu . . . . Openness is the essence of my faith” (TETTTC 67).
To repeat the same argument, Tharoor is an ardent supporter, admirer and strong believer
of Pluralism and so of Hinduism. He very aptly describes the principles of Hinduism and
simultaneously finds an echo of pluralism in it:

Indeed, Hindus pride themselves on belonging to a religion of astonishing
breadth and range of belief; a religion that acknowledges all ways of
worshipping God as equally valid--indeed, the only major religion in the
world that does not claim to be the only true religion. This eclectic and
non-doctrinaire Hinduism--a faith without where there are no heretics to
cast out because there has never been any such thing as a Hindu heresy—is
not the Hinduism that destroyed a mosque, nor the Hindutva spewed in
hate-filled speeches by communal politicians. (TETTTC 64)

Of course it is true that, while Hinduism as a faith might privilege tolerance, this does not
necessarily mean that all Hindus behave tolerantly. Yet India’s democracy helps to
acknowledge and accommodate the various identities of its multifaceted population.
Highlighting the importance of tolerance in Hinduism he asserts: “No one identity can
ever triumph in India: both the country’s chronic pluralism and the logic of the electoral
marketplace make this impossible . . . . After all there are too many diversities in our land
for any one version of reality to be imposed on all of us. (TETTTC 64)

He is also aware regarding the misuse of it: “The misuse of religion for political purposes
is, of course, a sad, sometimes tragic aspect of our contemporary reality . . . . Since
Hinduism believes that there are various ways of reaching the ultimate truth, the fact that adherents of my faith, in a perversion of its tenets, have chosen to destroy somebody else’s sacred place, have attacked others because of the absence of foreskin or the mark on a forehead, is profoundly un-Hindu. *(TETTTC 66-67)*

By illustrating and quoting the ideas of Swami Vivekananda he, further, writes exhaustively on open nature of Hinduism and also on the way it functions in our society. Hinduism, with its openness, its respect for variety its acceptance of all other faiths, is one religion which should be able to assert itself without threatening others. But this cannot be the Hinduism that destroyed a mosque, nor the Hindutvaspewed in hate-filled speeches by communal politicians. It has to be the Hinduism of Swami Vivekanand, who more than a century ago, at Chicago’s World Parliament of Religions in 1893, articulated the best liberal humanism that lies at the heart of his creed:

> I am, proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a country which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all countries of the earth. I am proud to tell you that we have gathered in our bosom the purest remnant of the Israelites, who came to southern India and took refuge with us in the very year in which their holy temple was shattered to pieces by Roman tyranny. I am proud to belong to the religion which has sheltered and is still fostering the remnant of the grand Zoroastrian nation. *(qtd in Tharoor, TETTTC 68-69)*

He does not like to stop and goes on describing further:

> Vivekananda went on to denounce the fact that sectarianism, bigotry and its horrible descendant, fanaticism, have long possessed this beautiful
earth’. His confident belief that their death-knell had sounded was sadly borne out. But his vision summarized, in the Sanskrit credo Sarva Dharma Sambhava, all religions are equally worthy of respect—is, in fact, the kind of Hinduism practised by the vast majority of India’s Hindus, whose instinctive acceptance of other faiths and forms of worship has long been the vital hallmark of Indianness. Vivekananda made no distinction between the actions of Hindus as a people (the grant of asylum, for instance) and their actions as a religious community (tolerance of other faiths): for him, the distinction was irrelevant because Hinduism was as much a civilization as a set of religious beliefs. In a different speech to the same Chicago convention, Swami Vivekananda set out his philosophy in simple terms:

“Unity in variety is the plan of, nature, and the Hindu has recognised it. Every other religion lays down certain fixed dogmas and tries to force society to adopt them. It places before society only one coat which must fit Jack and John and Henry, all alike. If it does not fit John or Henry, he must go without a coat cover his body. The Hindus have discovered that the absolute ‘can only be realised, or thought of or stated through the relative, and the images crosses, and crescents are simply so many, ‘symbols-so many pegs to hang spiritual ideas on. It is not that this help is necessary for everyone, but those that do not need it have no right to say that it is wrong. Nor is it compulsory in Hinduism. The Hindus have their faults, but mark this, they are always for punishing their own bodies, and never for cutting the throats of their neighbours. If the Hindu fanatic burns himself ‘on the pyre, he never lights the fire of Inquisition. (qtd. in Tharoor, TETTTC 69)
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. He points out the stunning growth in the recent situation, considered the most laudable in India:

India’s national identify has long been built on the slogan ‘unity in diversity’. . . . The sight in May 2004 of a Roman Catholic political leader (Sonia Gandhi) making way for a Sikh (Manmohan Singh) to be sworn in as Prime minister by a Muslim (President Abdul Kalam)-in a country Tilndu-caught the world’s imagination. That one simple moment of political change put to rest many of the arguments over Indian identity. India is never truer to itself than when celebrating its own diversity. (64-65)

G. Rai seems to agree with Tharoor’s idea of Indian nationalism when he writes: “Indian nationalism is inclusive, tolerant and pluralist . . . . Tharoor has always been engaged with the country on an intellectual level. As a writer he tries to concentrate on issues pertaining to Indian society and politics. There are certain themes which recur in his fictional and non-fictional works, particularly his faith in pluralism as leitmotif on Indian reality, the diversity of languages and religions which give a unique identity and unity and the forces which upset and diminish this unity” (40).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.
Tharoor’s characters are often represent a particular points of view. The radical Hindu, the fundamentalist Muslim, the American, trying to bring Coca-Cola to India and the secular administrators, all these characters dig up graves to explore the past to put forth its consequences in the contemporary period. It is through these characters every aspect of India comes alive. Counter to one character stands the other and hence the possibility for the readers to adjust a particular event from all perspectives. We get this kind of kaleidoscopic vision of the Ram Janmbhoomi-Babri Masjid agitation through Ram Charan Gupta asserting the Hindu dogmas, Mohd. Sarwar articulating the Muslim feelings and Lakshman and Gurinder remaining neutral, secular and helping us to apprehend the bureaucratic attitude. Shashi Tharoor presents the novel as one having many voices, points of view, perspectives and truths.

Through the eyes of Priscilla and Katherine, the sad plight of teeming illiterate women of India is flashed across the mind. The story of a white woman falling in love with both, India and an Indian has a hoary tradition from Passage to India to Heat and Dust and many other books.

Apparently, therefore the riotous stage of the novel, which describes a communal riot in Zalilgarh, is dexterously utilized by the author to highlight serious issues such as violence against women, dowry deaths and female infanticide. Emphasizing such morbid issues vitiating the society of Zalilgarh (a miniature India) and explicitly focusing on the inhuman and murderous violence faced by its women like Sundari, indirectly belittling Priscilla’s aforementioned desires. Kadambari, Sundari’s sister expostulates before Mrs, Katharine Hart: “You see, Mrs. Hart, this is the real issue for women in India. Not population control but violence against women. In our own homes what good are all our efforts as long as men have the power to do this to us? Your daughter never understood that” (RT 249).
Voicing her revolutionary views of extenuating the sufferings of such women of the small towns and villages of the subcontinent, making them aware and independent, capable of cherishing their own dreams and individualities as human beings, Priscilla Hart, categorically asserts her intentions and her ambitions in a letter to her friend Cindy Valeriani. Emerging as one of Tharoor’s spokespersons in the novel she avers: “I want to change the lives of these women, the choices they believe they have. I want to see them one day, these women of Zalilgarh and of a thousand other towns and villages like it in India, standing around the well discussing their own lives and hopes and dreams instead of complaining about their mother-in-law. I want to hear them not to say with a cross between pride and resignation, “My husband, he wants lots of children,” but rather, “I will decide when I am ready for a child.” I want them instead of planning to arrange their teenage daughter’s marriage to insist on sending her to high school. I want all this for them, and that’s why I’m here” (170).

While Priscilla Hart is portrayed by Tharoor as another first world philanthropist, readily empathizing with the derived denizens of Zalilgarh, and subsequently pursuing the “civilizing mission” of the third world and thus mitigating the so called “Whiteman’s burden,” her paramour V. Lakshman simultaneously signifies the “black native” possessing an ingrained sense of inferiority when compared to his “white” compradors. The detailed presentation of the heart-rending episodes delineating the ruthless violence against Fatima Bi and Sundari in Riot extensively justifies Priscilla’s and her organization’s altruistic goals, opposing the ‘commodification’ of women and children in the uneducated rural society of India. While on the one hand Tharoor’s description of Fatima Bi as a mother of seven malnourished children, who is afflicted with severe physical exhaustion due to repeated childbirth and squalor, aggravated by her husband’s violent and inhuman treatment, emerges as an unequivocal index of victimization of
women, on the other, Sundari’s portrayal as an intelligent and innocent girl, married off at a young age only to be burnt alive by her husband and mother-in-law, epitomizes the unflinching callousness of Zalilgarh’s male chauvinist society in the novel.

Highlighting the nature, significance and sanctity of love and marriage as prevailing in Indian society, the Indian view of love and marriage has also been explained in somewhat detail: “The West believes that love leads to marriage. In India we know that marriage leads to love, which is why divorce is almost unknown here, and love lives on even when marital partner dies, because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society as well as our psyche” (103).

In America marriage is a bond between two lovers but in India, marriage is a bond between two lovers as well as between families, one of the means for perpetuating the social order.

This clandestine relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla brings to surface several kinds of conflicts like the conflicts between Indian oriented values and the western perception of truth. They represent the attitudes of two different cultures towards sex, love, and marriage in concrete terms. Lakshman’s question to Priscilla: “These guys (her past lovers) you went out with, did you sleep with them?” (RT 82) evokes a casual response from her. Some of them replied Priscilla without any sense of guilt and shame further she says, “Lucky, I’m twenty four . . . you did not expect me to be a virgin, did you?” (83)

But in India, establishing any relationship of a girl with a man, before her marriage, is considered to be a sin. Shankar Das tells Mr. and Mrs. Hart: “But Zalilgarh is not America, in America you are doing such and such and so and so, but here it is different. And she is always listening” (13)
Githa, Lakshama’s wife presents the virginity and virtuosity of an Indian woman. Lakshaman tells Priscilla: “Of course she was a virgin. Forget sex, she hadn’t kissed a boy, she hadn’t even held hands with one. That’s how it is in India. That’s what’s expected (RT 83). Kalinsa Kurien also observes the matter sarcastically: “Women’s problems have continued to this day in India and the chastity of women is considered an issue in the twenty first century. For men, their social standing is never questioned” (Kurien 236).

Even after knowing that he is married and having a daughter, Priscilla falls in love with him. Lakshman too, finds in Priscilla someone with whom he could actually talk and discuss anything. Their rendezvous at the Kotli help them to know each other in every way. Their talks range from culture, history, politics and concept of marriage, to their past. This relationship develops to such an extent that Lakshman, at times, thinks of deserting Geetha for Priscilla with whom he plans to shift to America. But the age old tradition desists him from doing so and he confesses it before Priscilla: “Priscilla, forgive me, but I must end our relationship. I love you but I cannot leave my wife, my daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my love. I just can’t go on giving you the hope of a future together and returning home to the reality of my present. I believe it is more honest to tell you that what you cannot be” (RT 239).

Through Priscilla Tharoor presents the difference regarding the concept of marriage, Eastern and Western:

Priscilla questions the very foundation of the traditional Indian marriage system where the elders of the family map out and arrange the marriage of their grown-up adult children. She is unable to swallow this marriage as the lifetime commitment between a boy and a girl. She is more shocked to accept this kind of marriage in the case of Lakshman who is highly
educated and quite liberal in his philosophy of life. Even Lakshman is not very happy with this kind of marriage, as he does not find an intellectual compatibility with his wife. He finds a great level of compatibility with Priscilla but he does not feel bold enough to come out of the niche of traditional marriage and declare to the whole world that she is a better, more fulfilling and satisfying match for him. In this situation, she finds herself just an instrument to keep him in good humor and mood without getting any mileage in his life. At times she feels pity on him and labels him as, “Mr Right in the wrong place at the wrong time. (Sharma, “Priscilla Hart’s Search for Identities in Riot” 10)

This highly significant comment reflects how the construction of social identities in interpersonal relationship is at odds in Indian and Western cultures. Naturally, he is helpless to challenge the marriage imposed upon him by society and this leads to the estrangement in their relationship, though she, as a radical feminist, highlights even a man’s predicament in Indian setting:

I saw so much Lucky--a good man in bad marriage, someone capable of love who had no opportunity to love until I came along, a man who had not seen his own happiness fully until he met me. With me I think he realized for the first time that he hadn’t truly known love in his life and that he could find happiness, loving and being loved happiness, of course, at a price. A price that in the end he was not prepared--with his upbringing, his sense of his responsibilities, his inability to escape from Indian society to pay. (RT 241)
This also brings to the surface some of the so-called social taboos, like sex for discussion in a very bold way as sex also plays a vital role in bringing this civil servant closer to the foreign researcher. Geeta M. Patil rightly observes:

His (Laxman) nine loveless years of marriage with Geetha is one of the causes that he gets attracted towards Priscilla . . . . Geetha has a different attitude towards sex, in her amatory role she neither initiates nor welcomes, she is to endure rather than enjoy. Contrary to this comes Priscilla, with all the pleasures of sex, for her it is a joy, celebration for she gives as much as she takes. For Laxman being with her and enjoying sex is process of carnal discovery with an endless delight. (Patil 83)

Thus Geetha is born to endure sex rather than enjoy it. On the other hand, Priscilla enjoys every moment of it as sex is a great celebration. Therefore to achieve a heightened sense of pleasure, she initiates it, welcomes it and looks forward to every other step with a great expectation and fulfilment. Priscilla’s views about sex bring Lakshman closer to her but ultimately his social face wins over his personal and existential faces and he decides to end the relationship. All these details point to the fact that Indian characters have not been able to construct such identities which could give a front seat to the emotional aspect of inter-personal relationship rather than to a social institution, like marriage. Priscilla cannot swallow his decision to stick to the same loveless marriage: “Here I am, on Independence Day, wanting to give up my independence for him, knowing he has to win his own independence first. I can’t believe he’s even hesitating to leave loveless marriage he hates for the woman he says he loves” (RT 199).

Gupta’s remonstration clarifies that all the so called ‘cliches’ about India, mentioned by Diggs in the course of his description of the town of Zalilgarh, cliches which every foreign visitor like Diggs is aware of much before his visit to the subcontinent, are
actually the creations of these foreigners themselves. With Ram Charan Gupta as one of the major voices in the novel, Shashi Tharoor once again elaborates upon the sense of superiority that the Westerners automatically assume as compared to the natives in the novel. Gupta’s reference to Mother Teresa further reinforces the comments made by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak about the First world countries, especially their women, for their over sympathetic attitude towards the people of the oriental countries. Describing the above mentioned Gupta-Diggs encounter, that presents a citizen of the Third World as an accuser of the First World for consistently attempting to reduce the former to ignominy by highlighting its negatives, the novel evolves into a fictional piece chastising the west and its media for adopting a biased attitude towards the east. Emphatically stating that the richness and the exuberance of the Indian culture and civilization finds little expression in the treatises written by foreign authors, Gupta’s argument brings out the irony that although colonialism came to an end decades ago, yet its people, their past, their culture, in fact their identity as a nation still continues to be utilized as a source of entertainment and melodrama by the foreigners. Instead of apprehending the sub-continental ethics and culture these western visitors largely satisfy their lust for excitement and fascination, by visiting its historical places and festivals, by collecting evidences proving its gory and violent image turning a blind eye to the magnanimity, tolerance and the richness of its ancient culture. Highlighting this obvious anomaly in the occidental journalism, Gupta asks: “When will you and your friends in the foreign press give your readers an article on the richness and glory of this ancient country, Mr. Diggs, its varied and profound civilization?” (229).

Through Ram Charan Gupta, Tharoor essays to portray the recent and the unprecedented resurgence of Hinduism in the Indian subcontinent. Mohammad Sarwar, on the other hand, a historian and an ex-communist who had revolted against the penetration of Coke
into the Indian market way back in the 1970s as a student, has been portrayed by the author as the strongest spokesperson for the Muslim community. Although Sarwar with his newly found faith in democracy and Islam also deliberates upon the increasing disidence between the Hindus and the Muslims, yet he does not emerge as an exact mirror image of Gupta. In spite of his noble and intellectual profession, Sarwar is portrayed as a Muslim chauvinist unable to give greater priority to anything vis a vis Islam. During his visit to Zalilgarh in search of information about a canonized saint Gazi Mian, Sarwar in course of his meetings with Lakshman and Diggs reveals his resentments against the Hindus of his nation.

Tharoor has given an equal space and participation to both Gupta and Sarwar along with their religious communities, in the novel, and has largely used Randy Diggs, the American journalist to ‘dig’ into their psyches and express their respective points of view. As one goes through the novel, it becomes quite evident that actually Tharoor uses the arguments advanced by both these characters, to interrogate the ‘secular’ face of the Indian democracy. Emerging as a categorical delineation of the grievances harboured by both the Hindus and the Muslims of the Indian subcontinent, Riot highlights the hollowness of India’s emphatically proclaimed secularism.

The novel gives expression to the resentments harboured by the Indian citizens against their own governments. With Ram Charan Gupta justifying the increase in Hindu fundamentalism, by quoting innumerable instances from the past (ancient and recent) and Sarwar outlandishly and of course, ironically negating historical facts, so as to prove himself, Riot surfaces as the fictionist’s stage which presents India on the verge of another imminent division. The author, however, holds Indian politicians responsible for such state of affairs, and indirectly indicts them for unscrupulously playing with the people’s religious sentiments to serve their own vested interests. Reprimanding the Indian
polity, Tharoor voices his views through Ram Charan Gupta who categorically unveils the truth about the country’s leadership by commenting thus: “They are all atheists and communists in power in our country, people who have lost their roots. They forget that the English have left. It was English law they upheld not Indian justice” (RT 53).

Thus through Gupta, Tharoor not only indicts the government of India, for upholding the laws practiced by India’s colonizers--the British, primarily referring to the imperial principle of divide et impera - but also highlights the irony that the Indian leadership has apparently inherited the art of colonizing from the white imperialists, and has continuously used it since independence under a secular veneer.

Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot*, as a postmodern text, reveals its self-conscious, self-referential attitude towards literary conventions and language. A cross-textual study of the novel brings to light the individual idiosyncrasies of the styles of Tharoor as well as underscores the importance of form over content. *Riot* exhibits a hybridized form and makes a multiple focalized narration of an event by splicing and scattering it in a spatial dimension across the entire length of the text. Set in a multi-linear pace the narrative of the text is interspersed with literary pastiche and shifting paradigms or point of view. The text subverts conventions of traditional narrative, dismantle hierarchy and exhibit the postmodern accent of dialogic narration where meaning is created through an interaction and dialogue of the multiple systems, discoursed ideologies and voices within the artistic entirety of the novel.

Going through all the (80) sections of the novel, a reader who moves forward from section 23 to section 37 unearths the revelation that the romantic love affair between Lakshman and Priscilla Hart has crossed racial and cultural boundaries and has grown into a committed relationship and it also presents Lakshman’s sense of dilemma between choices which develops an important thread of the plot. Tharoor further exploits the meta-
fictional device with the repetition of the expression: “Simply in the wrong place at the wrong time”, in section I was well as in section II “the beginnings foretells the end” (136). Tharoor consorts with the reader, “And so I go along as she spins the glorious schemas in the gossamer of her illusions . . . .” (106). Riot is charged with self-reflexiveness. “Let the form of the novel change with each reading, and let the content change too”(137). He also defines the indeterminacy of truth in a postmodern world: “But how will any reader understand the truth? The Truth! The singular thing about truth, my dear, is that you can only speak of it in the plural” (137).

With meta-fictional artistry, Tharoor enters its world as the ‘intrusive’ author and applies the meta-fictional device as a character in the novel (Lakshman) and makes witty inter-textual reference to his earlier work The Great Indian Novel: “I’ve read about this chap who’s just reinvented the Mahabharatha as a twentieth century story, epic style, oral trading narrative digressions . . . why can’t write a novel that read like – like an encyclopedia?” (135-136).Tharoor explicates that meta-fictional production of artifice. “Priscilla is an escape from reality, her magic cannot survive too much realism” (106).

Magic realism is synonymous with the literary style of post 60s in Latin American fiction and Gabriela Garcia Marquez’s One Hundred Years of Solitude (1967) is a classic magic realist text. Salman Rushdie, the Indian counterpart of post-colonial writing explored the literary possibilities of magic realism in Indian fiction. Shashi Tharoor follows Rushdie as postmodern writer inventing a magical atmosphere in the third world context. Tharoor is seriously engaged in blurring the boundary between the real and the unreal. He weaves the magical atmosphere of India into his works. He captures the magic of India into the rustic settings of Zalilgarh. The tension in the text is achieved by juxtaposing the real and the unreal. Time, an important defining factor of the real world is skilfully manipulated by Tharoor. The linear nature of time of the real world is made non-liner in Riot. He
narrates *Riot* back and forth in non-linear time by casting the fictional narrative in a spatial dimension. Read against its spatial dimensions, *Riot* begins with resolution and alternates between exposition and complication. It opens with an announcement of Priscilla Hart’s murder and introduces the postmodern notion of the indeterminacy of a single truth. Tharoor’s magic realism characteristically draws upon Indian mythology. Unlike the copious mythological references from the *Mahabharata* in *The Great Indian Novel*, in *Riot* Tharoor draws on the epic *Ramayana*: “Do you know our god Ram? The hero of the epic *Ramayana*? He was a great hero. A king . . . while he was in the forest his wife Sita was kidnapped by the evil demon Ravana and taken to Lanka. But Ram, with his brother Lakshaman and with the help of a monkey army led by the god Hanuman, invaded the demon, and brought his wife back” (52).

Thus magic realism, a characteristic feature of the postmodernist imagination, is reflected in *Riot*. The text links the history of Individuals to years of human history and mythology through magic realism. Tharoor, in *Riot*, reaches far into the past: “Every year for centuries, perhaps indeed since 1034, Ghazi Miyan’s wedding ceremony is rescheduled around the supposed date of the real event” (66).

*Riot* proves to be a postmodernist fiction by exposing the indeterminacy of history by blurring the boundary between fact and fantasy. Tharoor in the light of postmodernist fiction reveals an intense passion for marginal figures and the ideologically manicured gaps in the official record.

Significantly, one of the most outstanding metanarratives among Hindus is the birthplace of their God Ram which is called Ram Janmabhoomi temple. Contradictory versions about the god and the place are recorded in the text of the historian professor Mohammed Sarwar who is appalled at the fundamentalism of the bigoted Hindus. He justifies his ground by citing examples from the transcript of Randy Digg’s interview with him. The
narrator records the views of professor Sarwar who rhetorically asks Randy Diggs: “Isn’t it amazing how those Hindu Chauvinist types claims history on their side? The precision, the exactness, of their dating techniques are enough to drive a mere professor like me to distraction” (180).

Foregrounding the contradictions among the Hindutva type, he quotes their views regarding the birth of Rama. According to them, Ram lived in the Treta- Yuga of Hindu tradition. It implies that he flourished about a million years ago. Such outstanding claims are beyond the comprehension of historian like Professor Sarwar.

By making the Hindu leader Ram Charan Gupta’s these words, Tharoor emphasizes the subversion of the reality of a religious dogma against a myth. Tharoor abruptly shocks the reader by funneling a personal narrative into a thousand years, “Now Lord Rama was born in Ayodhya many thousands of years go, in the Treta–yuga period of Hindu calendar” (52).

Thus a reader oriented text, Tharoor’s Riot, by advocating the subjugation of the narrator to the reader, unequivocally shares Roland Barthes views in his essay ‘The Death of the Author’, wherein Barthes criticizes the romantic model of a novel by saying that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author” (168).

This alert omniscient reader referred to by Barthes, persistently gropes for evidence throughout the course of his reading of the Riot and draws his conclusions. In fact, obsessed with experimentation in the art of writing a novel, Tharoor once again adhering to Barthes’ dictum that “the text is a tissue of quotations drawn from the innumerable centres of culture” (Barthes167) uses a murder as its pivotal event and ‘shows’ the various pieces of incremental information he has about Priscilla, his protagonist, through short narratives to his readers who ‘decode’ the story, and the chronology of events, from these scraps of information, leaving the novel open for interpretation.
It may, therefore, be observed that by using sections of varying lengths constituting pieces and fragments of crucial information, the author enables the novel to progress smoothly. These sections help unfold the story in a two-tier system. It runs along two separate strands, the first one running through records, entries and letters, and the second one moving along interviews, conversations and interrogations. Every single short narrative highlights a perspective about Priscilla Hart and her personality, her universe, and also the tragic flaw of her character which might be seen as one of the reasons contributing to her death. Further, these pieces of narration explore the socio-political conditions of the place in which she lived and worked, besides exploring the conditions entrap from her in circumstances leading to her death. It may also be emphasized that although every single fragmentary narrative is an independent whole in itself, wherein an individual story not only begins but also ends, yet the fragments have interrelatedness among themselves. As already discussed, this interconnectivity has been established by a common subject and event--here Priscilla and her death--which play the role of a pivot around which the diverse and discursive accounts, reports, experiences and controversies revolve. However, since all these narrations in whatever form, are separate and possess an individuality of their own, each having a complete story, therefore the reader may take the liberty of reading it in any order without missing the crux of the story. Thus it is perceived that despite possessing the potential to be read in any order, the novel does not lose its readership as the readers enjoy a sort of easy, though dexterous, interconnectivity among its different parts.

The beauty and the significance of such an unconventional structuring of fiction is emphatically underlined by V. Lakshman who is one of the main characters of the novel itself. “I’d like to write a novel that doesn’t read like a novel. Novels are too easy--they tell a story, in a linear narrative, from start to finish . . . I’d do it differently . . . . In which
you can turn to any page and read . . . They’re all connected, but you see the
interconnections differently depending on the order in which you read them” (*RT* 135-
136).

Thus Tharoor expounds his own philosophy of novel writing through Lakshman. It is
further observed that championing Barthe’s postmodern concept that differentiated a
‘work’ from a ‘text’, *Riot* sincerely adheres to his connotations of textuality that highlight
the way a text is put together. The events and descriptions in the novel follow a somewhat
cinematic style of progression, as its chapters or sections have been arranged by the
author according to the text-time and not according to the story-time.

The novel is set by Tharoor in the year 1989. Evidently this year has been selected by the
author because of its history—a time which led to the major Ayodhya episode. Going by
all the entries of the novel, we observe that the events in Tharoor’s *Riot* start on the 2nd
of February 1989, and end on the 16th of October of the same year. Thus the novel spans
an actual period of eight and a half months only. However, considering the various issues
and events discussed by different characters of the novel, Tharoor successfully picturises
a larger canvas of time before his readers, encompassing events that occurred both pre-
and post-1989, the Hindu-Sikh riots of 1984, and the Ayodhya incident of 1992 for
instance. Further in the ‘Afterword’ to the book, he refers to the declaration made by the
different affiliates of the Sangh Pariwar regarding the commencement of the construction
of a temple in Ayodhya in March 2002, much to the embarrassment of the Prime
Minister. It is therefore observed that in *Riot*, facts from history and culture have been
fully exploited by Tharoor, so as to bring life and dynamism to the novel. Advocating the
importance of the historicity of time as evidenced in *Riot*, Tharoor expostulates: “I think
the best crystal ball is the rear-view mirror . . . . It is part of the writer’s job to recapture
moments of history. My novel stands as a portrait of time, of tendencies that were brought
to the fore, the genie that was let out of the bottle and could not be put back. I think we should take that genie by looking it squarely in the eye” (Kreisler). It is obvious that the *Riot* embellished with diverse themes, valencies, and meanings, addresses its readers through fragmentary, short, and realistic narratives. It is not only an example of postmodernist and postcolonial text but also a strong illustration of the plurality of Indian culture which leaves behind multiple meanings for multiple interpretations.

Tharoor’s love for India’s history and culture runs throughout the novel. In the languor of a lazy summer two people find the magic of human chemistry; suddenly all barriers of nations and boundaries of perception vanish. The basic issue on which the plot is built Ramjanmabhoomi-Babri Masjid conflict, in the context of and after so much print and other media has been expended on it, to present the black and white stereotypes of the Hindu fundamentalist and the Secularist, Hindu and Muslim is to make a mockery of the issue itself. Leave aside the mere black and white; there is not even an effort at reconstructing the complex context within which that black and white exists. The other major issue that the book concerns itself with is that of the reproductive rights of women or, as Priscilla Hart sees it, the rights and dignity of women in general.

A postmodern perspective of the contemporary female world is traceable in Tharoor’s elucidation of the diversified lives of various female characters in the novel. The description of the occidental female view-points in the persons of Katharine Hart and Priscilla Hart, accompanied by the detailed accounts of the Oriental women like Geetha, Kadambari, Fatima Bi and Sundari, highlight that social reality is lived social relations--our most important political construction.

India is a victim of cultural collisions. Many Hindus and Muslims sacrifice their lives to protect their socio-cultural and religious identities. The novel raises many questions like
what are we living for? What is our truth? What does religion mean to us? Does any religion permit the massacre of the innocent people? Is a temple or mosque more important than a thousand lives?

Tharoor’s fascination and concern for India is evident in his using her as his fictional settings and problematization of national issues that require urgent consideration. Shagufta Parween lightly observes:

His novels *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Show Business* (1992), and *Riot* (2001) are all set in India. His artistic opus displays not merely his creative erudition, but also a firm commitment to humanitarian tolerance, democracy, pluralism, secularism and a concern with the history of India. If he sings a paean to the nation and its civilizational greatness, it is definitely not a blind eulogy. Rather, he adroitly juxtaposes the flaws of the grand architects and detractors of the Indian nation and the problems that hamper the nation building and threaten the very existence of India as a secular nation. His concern with history, truth, and ideologies that perpetuate particular forms of knowledge and specific versions of history, seeking to manipulate and homogenize both truth and history is evident in two of his famed fictional works, *The Great Indian Novel* and *Riot*. Both these novels belong to the genre of postmodern historiographic metafiction. (56)

So it is clear from the above discussion that India is a plural and a secular country and, simultaneously has 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. 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, he 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 seeks mediators (saints or priests) to pray to 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.

On the whole, *Riot* is a vibrant work of fiction about the communal flare up in Northern India in the wake of Ram Janambhumi Movement by Hindu extremists in late 1990s. The book takes a wide range of topics. On the one level Tharoor examines the reasons of communal tension between Hindu and Muslim fundamentalism. The novelist gives a convincing account of the role of the administration in controlling the riot. On another level the book is concerned with the mystery surrounding the murder of an idealistic American student and welfare worker who comes to volunteer in a women's health programme. Tharoor portrays a nation in struggle both against external and internal forces. He calls India a land of adulteration, black marketing, corruption, communal strife and dowry killings. The novel *Riot* is highly praised for brilliant experimentation with narrative form.