

Socio-Political Consciousness in Riot: A Love Story

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Abstract

The present work, 'Socio-political Consciousness in Riot: A Love Story', throws light on the consciousness of social, political, cultural, economic, intellectual, and cultural aspects of contemporary Indian society. Tharoor being an eminent scholar, politician, and writer flourished the Indian English literature to global platforms. Through his works, he reached the psyche and heart of his readers. Tharoor has put contemporary issues in front of his readers so they can recognize, analyze, and evaluate their impact on them as well as on society. In the novel, Riot Tharoor puts the relevant contemporary problems through the puzzle of a murder mystery that has a socio-political consciousness at its core. The cross-cultural love story spiced up with social, communal politics makes its readers glued to the novel till the end and the characters portray their socio-political consciousness as it is shaped by the environment they are in. Tharoor made an effort to answer these issues with his witty yet engaging narrative which runs through the veins of his vivid characters. Riot deals with sensitive yet significant issues of Indian society and tries to stir the consciousness of every reader with the relevant question embedded in its narrative. Through Riot Tharoor has successfully portrayed vivid contemporary politics and socio-political consciousness of the Indian society.

Keywords

Socio-political Consciousness, Shashi Tharoor, religion, Cross-cultural relationship, social life, Politics, Communal riots, Contemporary India, Secularism.

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India as a country has been a reoccurring oracle of writing in modern Indian English literature. Its social, cultural, economic, and political heritage is imbibed in every Indian English Writer's work. India has produced gems writers such as Salman Rushdie, V.S. Naipaul, Khushwant Singh, Vikram Seth, Arundhati Roy, and Shashi Tharoor, who have portrayed all aspects of India in its true sense. In this paper, an attempt has been made by the researcher to unfold Socio-Political Consciousness in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. The research is limited to this novel only and specifically stresses the socio-political consciousness aspect Shashi Tharoor said in one of his interviews, "I have been extraordinarily, emotionally and intellectually fascinated by the idea of India, by the forces that have shaped and made India and by the forces that have sometimes threatened to unmake it" ("Beyond" 11).

Tharoor has an unprecedented reputation as an experimenting novelist. *Riot* encompasses innovative narrative techniques and invokes curiosity in its readers. Tharoor being a craftsman has crafted many writing styles to enrich his novel *Riot*, he applied journalistic reporting, journal and diary writing, letter writing, and transcripts of interviews to reflect harsh reality from various points of view imbibed in the novel. The mystery of the novel unfolds through the eyes and voices of various characters among news clippings, journals, diaries, personal letters, scrapbooks, private conversations, and transcripts of interviews.

In *Riot* the novel begins with the shocking death of a twenty-four-year-old American research scholar named Priscilla Hart of Manhattan who came to India as a HELP-US volunteer in a Women's Health Programme and has been brutally murdered in the small town, Zalilgarh located in U.P. during a communal riot erupts in wake of Babri Masjid agitation. In the novel one of the embassy spokesmen suggests the brutal murder of Priscilla Hart, "No other foreigner has died in the sectarian violence that has killed several hundred Indians in the last three weeks and Ms. Hart may simply have been in the wrong place at the wrong time" (Tharoor 1).

Tharoor being a keen observer of the drastic changes that take place in India, has brilliantly portrayed social and political aspects of contemporary Indian society in the novel. He provided appropriate relevance to every aspect of the novel. One of the aspects that has gained the attention of the reader and glued him to the book till the end is the love affair of Priscilla Hart and V. Lakshman, District Magistrate of Zalilgarh and an intellectual IAS officer married and a family man. Their relationship flashes the contrast of social, cultural, economic, and political aspects between West and East. Both have different attitudes towards their relationship and take on love, sex, and marriage. In many aspects they have similar

takes which brought them close but candid sex discussion plays a vital role in forming a strong bond between them. Tharoor puts cultural differences to its readers through their dialogues magnificently. When Lakshman asks Priscilla, “These guys (her Exes) you went out with, did you sleep with them?” (Tharoor 82). She replied not being offended naturally, “Some of them.....Lucky (Lakshman), I am 24.... You didn’t expect me to be a virgin, did you?” (Tharoor 83). In comparison to that his wife, Geeta was a pious virtuous Indian woman who did not even hold hands with any other man except her husband. Her attitude toward sex is way different than Priscilla’s. For her, she must provide everything her husband wants and she didn’t want to initiate. On the other hand, Priscilla celebrates every moment of physical union like a festival and has no hesitation to initiate. For Lakshman, Priscilla is the partner that he fancied and he went too fast with her in their relationship but eventually socio-political conditions around Lakshman took their relationship his personal life, his duty towards his family, the fate of his little daughter Rekha and societal pressure along with growing turbulence in the Zalilgarh put him on the verge of ending this sojourn of this passionate communion of them. From the beginning, Priscilla was always on the losing end because of Laxman’s double standards which she feels it’s the part of Indian social and cultural values and political upheavals of the place called Zalilgarh. Tharoor puts the concept of marriage as in America marriage is a bond between two lovers while in India, it’s an arrangement between families.

In the Indian society in its socio-political arrangement, Priscilla observes that Indian women irrespective of their religion or even status don’t celebrate a respectable position in the society. They bag the secondary spot and are playful objects in the hands of their husbands, protectors, and society. Women always become the victim of exploitation of their families, society, and politics. Through Priscilla, Tharoor focuses on violence against women. One of the characters Sundari, a married woman sister of Kadambari, who works with Priscilla Hart became victims of the inhuman violence of her husband and her mother-in-law who tried to burn her alive it was the price she paid for being a woman. Later in the novel, Priscilla’s mother Katherine Hart visits Sundari at the request of Kadambari’s piety on the condition of women in India and wonders about the socio-political rights and their effectiveness for Indian women.

Shashi Tharoor through his lucid narrative condemns the superstition imbibed in Indian society. A Hindu on any heyday believes in astrology, stars, kundali, horoscope, and myths. Geeta wife of Lakshman is an exemplary character who when she comes to know about her husband’s extra-marital erotic sojourn with the blond foreigner Priscilla and his escape place to the U.S.A. goes to Swamiji and

Socio-Political Consciousness in Riot: A Love Story
Dr. Nilofar Akhtar, Nirmal Singh Mehta

prays for the return of her husband from this way where is going to abandon his family and goes on fasting for her cause.

Tharoor focuses on the political aspects through his characters like Ram Chandra Gupta, the firebrand Hindu Indian leader who is very vocal about his attitude towards Muslims. When Randy Diggs Journalist for The New York Journal meets him, he says, "In Ayodhya, there are many temples of Ram. Bust the most famous temple is not a temple anymore. It is Ram Janmabhoomi, the birthplace of Ram. A fit site for a grand temple, you might think (Tharoor 52). He proudly said that in past days a grand temple stood there which was knocked down by the Mughal Emperor Babar when he invaded our country and built a Mosque in its place known as Babri Masjid. The people of Ayodhya and the whole Hindu community were hurt by this action. He rhetorically asks Randy Diggs, "Would Muslims be happy if any Hindu king had gone and built a temple to Ram in Mecca?" (Tharoor 53). Ram Chandra Gupta echoing the Hindutva ideology in the novel says, "The non-Hindu people in Hindustan... must cease to be foreigners, or may stay in the country wholly subordinate to the Hindu nation, claiming, deserving no privileges, much less any preferential treatment –not even citizen's rights" (Tharoor 123-124).

On the contrary, a Muslim scholar, Professor Mohmmad Sarwar of the History department at Delhi University, argued to defend the psyche of Muslims. He argues about "Composite culture" and "Cultural Religiosity". "A number of Muslim religious figures in India are worshipped by Hindus- think of Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chishti, Shah Madar, Shaikh Nasiruddin who was known as Chiragh-i-Delhi, or Khwaja Khizr (Tharoor 64). still, Hindus have some grudges against Muslims and also have prejudices country-wide. Through the novel, readers come to know that The Hindutva brigade scratching a new past for the nation. Indians especially Hindus want to teach an unforgettable lesson to the Muslims though they have not learned many lessons from themselves. He recalls celebrated Urdu poet Mohammad Iqbal who said, "Tumhari tahzeeb khud apne khanjar se khud-khushi karegi / Jo shukh-i-nazuk pe aashiyani banega, napidar hoga" (Tharoor 67). He believes that our civilization will commit suicide out of its complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction. He argued that our diversity brings richness to our existence every Muslim is as important as a Hindu for making this country called India every community is a pillar that holds the weight of our country and in the absence of any of its pillars the splendid structure of India is incomplete.

After the mutiny of 1857 where Hindus and Mughals fought together for one the great cause of independence shook the foundation of British rule hence they implemented divide-and-rule policies between Hindus and Muslims and a power

struggle began which intensified in the late nineteenth century and led to partition of India based on religion in 1947. It has influenced both communities and let them carry their prejudices which are exploited by political scavengers i.e. politicians for their communal politics. Lakshman explains his socio-political consciousness to Priscilla, “Why should today’s Muslims have to pay a price for what Muslims may have done four hundred and fifty years ago? It’s just politics, Priscilla. The twentieth-century politics of deprivation has eroded the culture’s confidence. Hindu chauvinism has emerged from the competition for resources in a contentious democracy. Politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities (Tharoor 145). With the ghastly memories of the partition and the violence it unfolds a certain section of Hindus wants to rebuild and recapture the faded glory of the temples allegedly destroyed by Muslims. Lakshman says to Priscilla, “The rage of the Hindu mobs being stoked by the bigots is the rage of those who feel themselves supplanted in this completion of identities, who think that they are taking their country back from usurpers of long ago. They want revenge against history, but they do not realize that history is its own revenge (Tharoor 147).

Shashi Tharoor provides logical arguments to convey the sanctity of the Hindu religion. Through Lakshman the mouth-piece of Tharoor says, “Hindu Fundamentalism” is a contradictory term “because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals; no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred book” (Tharoor 143). which portrays the socio-political consciousness of the character as well as of the writer. Tharoor argued more about Hinduism in his 2018 book *Why I am a Hindu* which explores the history of Hinduism and its core tenets.

Superintendent of Police Gurinder Singh is blunt, tough, hard-drinking, foul-mouthed yet a dedicated and honest civil servant whose aim is to maintain law in order in Zalilgarh and control the riots at any cost. He once had a dream of being a modern agriculturist; he went to St. Stephens and was a batch mate of V. Lakshman District Magistrate of Zalilgarh. He was on the verge of quitting his Government Job when his nephew along with his father burnt alive by the Rioters in the Hindu-Sikh Riot of 1984, but his father persuaded him to continue to contribute to the cause of saving innocent lives from such incidents. Gurinder Singh tries to persuade Lakshman not to break his marriage and family for just a girl this can destroy his career and his family reputation. He is a real friend to Lakshman as he protects him from public disgrace by concealing Priscilla’s scrapbook which he handed over to him and also manipulates her postmortem report by concealing the fact that she was carrying Lakshman’s child.

Socio-Political Consciousness in Riot: A Love Story
Dr. Nilofar Akhtar, Nirmal Singh Mehta

Shashi Tharoor excels in the challenge of representing India through literature as *Riot* holds a mirror to the contemporary socio-political society of India that makes the secular heart bleed. *Riot* is based on the real incidents of a riot that took place in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh. The actual incidents of conflicts of Ram Janambhoomi and Babri Masjid run in the background of the novel. *Riot* gives a new perspective to its reader being a reflection of socio-political reality.

Riot the novel unfolds uncomfortable complex questions about personal, social, communal, and political about India through the small north-Indian town of Zalilgarh. Tharoor portrays the mayhem of communal agitation which leads to the demolition of Babri Masjid with sincerity. He connects different tenets of the story from the news item of Priscilla's murder to much broader concerns of social, political, and communal relations in India. Tharoor draws everyday life its challenges its horrors its beauty on the canvas with his playfulness in his narrative that leaves a lasting impact on the readers. He tried to answer sensitive topics rather than questions of religion, socio-cultural, and socio-political issues with delicacy and logic. Tharoor remarkably portrays the cross-culture love story, complexity of diversity, and troubles of two religions. He left unanswered who killed Priscilla as an open-ended question and left it to its reader's interpretation and it raised curiosity and many questions which is up to the readers as all questions concern each of us. Tharoor's socio-political consciousness echoes in his own words, "I have grown up here (India). My intellect, my values have been shaped and formed by the experience of growing up in India, So India matters very much to me and I want to turn matter to India and the ways I can do is through my writings" (Patil 68).

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