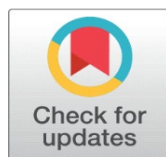


# PORTRAYAL OF COMMUNAL ISSUES IN RECENT INDIAN ENGLISH FICTION

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper tries to explore the theme of communalism in Indian English fiction in the new millennium. Communalism in India refers to the division and conflict between religion and ethnicity. The paper focuses on a selection of contemporary Indian English novels published in the first decade of the new millennium, analyzing the representation of communalism and also how these works contribute to the larger discourse on communal tensions in India. It aims to shed light on the ways in which these novels reflect, critique, and engage with the theme of communalism as a complex social, and political issue. Through close reading and interpretation of these novels, the paper explores the narrative techniques employed by authors to convey the complexities and nuances of communalism, and also how these literary representations contribute to shaping public consciousness and understanding of the issue and thus an attempt to bring harmony and tolerance to preserve India's diverse cultural fabric.

**Keywords:** Communalism, Secularism, Religion, Riot, Society, Politics, Culture, Tolerance

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The arrival of the new millennium brought new hopes and fresh aspirations amongst people everywhere in the world. For India twentieth century was of momentous significance. The people of India took a giant stride that released the country from the shackles of colonialism. India has done well in every field (science, literature, music, art architecture, industrial development, etc.) since its freedom, and now it is among the leading countries of the world. But instead of our growth and development India seems to have learned a little from history and seems to be still living in the days of partition, as communalism still affects our social life and politics to a great extent. No other phenomenon has affected life in the subcontinent so adversely as communalism. Communalism came to the stage as early as the beginning of the eighteenth century as evidenced by a communal riot in Ahmadabad, no one had any inkling about the magnitude and character it might assume in the future. The heart rendering experience of partition however did not put an end to

the communalization of Indian society and polity. It only exacerbated it, at least in India, as the memories of inter-communal violence were invoked for political mobilization. As a result, during the post-independence period, communalism continued to plague social consciousness in the country. This success of communal forces heralded a new stage in the development of communalism. By the end of the twentieth century a new term, Hindu militancy, also came into existence.

Violence both spontaneous and premeditated has always been an integral part of communalism. But during the last few years, the character of communal violence has changed and now it has become more and more intense, inhuman, and brutal. Earlier communal tensions and resulting violence did not lead to large-scale mayhem and murder. Their reach was limited and was generally suppressed quickly; the state and society then exercised as restraining influence. Now communal riots are large-scale events like Ajodhya, Godhra, Kandhmal, Muzaffarnagar, etc. Victims are larger in number, but the manifestation has become so cruel that it is difficult to associate the perpetrators as human beings.

A major social consequence of communalism in recent times is the segregation of people on the basis of their religious beliefs and more grievously, the displacement of the population from their traditional areas of residence. The thing is happening in almost all the cities for quite some time after each communal riot, people move to the areas where their co-religionists can possibly provide safety. Such a process has happened in almost all cities: Mumbai, Delhi, Lucknow, Kanpur, Muzaffarnagar, Meerut, and so on. Large-scale displacement of the population has been a common consequence of almost all communal incidents in recent times.

A novel being a strong medium to portray what is happening in society has attracted writers to portray what they feel regarding an incident or an issue. In the first decade of the 21st century, writers like Shiv K. Kumar, Shashi Tharoor, Manju Kapur, Kiran Nagarkar, Rohinton Mistry, and a few other writers presented the brutal faces of communalism in their novels. Shashi Tharoor (2001), Manju Kapur (2002), have portrayed the Ayodhya issue, Shiv K. Kumar (2006) has portrayed the Hindu-Sikh relationship, Rohinton Mistry has presented the tyranny of a political party in his *Family Matters* (2002), and Kiran Nagarkar takes terrorism for his *God's Little Soldier* (2006).

In *Riot: a novel*, Shashi Tharoor takes the Ayodhya issue and Ram Janambhoomi Movement as the central issue of his novel. Shashi Tharoor is a diplomat who has worked in the United Nations as a Joint Secretary and was nominated by India for the election of General Secretary of the United Nations, has presented India during the late eighties when the Ram Sila Poojan program and collection 'consecrated bricks' was going on. *Riot* deals with aggressive Hindu forces, Ramsila Poojan Procession and the riot in the wake of that procession, and other issues of the Ram Janambhoomi Movement. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* deals with the Ayodhya dispute and Operation Blue Star, the important historical events in India in the last two decades of the twentieth century, that gave birth to two severe riots, in which thousands of innocent lives were lost, but the core issue in the novel is communal riot which has been a social stigma in independent India.

*Riot* gives an account of a Hindu-Muslim riot that breaks out in Zalilgarh, a small town in the U.P. on September 30, 1989, in the wake of the Ram Sila Poojan Program. The focus is not on the killing of Hindus and Muslims, but on that of a Christian named Prascilla Hart, a 24 years old Ph.D. scholar at New York University, who was carrying out field research in India and voluntarily working on a population control project run by the American group HELP-US, which works for women empowerment. The story unfolds with the arrival of the parents of Prascilla Hart in

India and the narrative proceeds through the accounts of a dozen or more characters all of whom relate their own version of events surrounding her killing and these are documented in 80 pieces down from journals, diaries, letters, cables, interview, scrapbooks, notebooks, transcript, translation, etc. of different size and distinctive style to add verisimilitude to the fictional details. Though the novel deals with a riot in a fictional location, the novelist studies the fresh wave of communal frenzy which gripped India against the backdrop of the dispute over Ram Mandir and Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1989. Tharoor sees the whole issue from a historical perspective.

It was Harsh Mander's Unheard Voices an unpublished account and the newspaper account of a young girl, Amy Biehl from Palo Alto, who has been killed by a black mob in the violence of South Africa, paved the way for Riot. "AMERICAN SLAIN IN INDIA" Tharoor (2001) is the hook on which Tharoor has hung his novel. The novel starts with the news of the death of Prascilla Hart, who is stabbed to death in Zalilgarh town in the U.P. during a Hindu-Muslim riot. Tharoor zooms out this small snapshot into a much wider canvas about the fragile communal relation in India and animosity between Hindus and Muslims rising to a fever pitch in a small town in Northern India. We are introduced to District Magistrate V. Lakshman, Superintendent of Police Gurinder Singh, a Muslim scholar Professor Mohammed Sarwar and a Hindu-spouting political leader Ramcharan Gupta. All these characters represent their particular outlook regarding the present scenario Ramcharan Gupta represents the violent Hindutva agenda, Prof. Sarwar presents Muslim status in independent India and presents a secular outlook, Lakshman and Gurinder Singh, both are government officers and try to solve communal problems and bring back normalcy. Although the views presented by these characters are their own particular view and cannot claim universality or truth for every Indian, they are of great significance to understanding the socio-political scenario of that time.

Riot appeals for tolerance through Prof. Sarwar who presents a short history of Indian heritage and the inheritance of Muslims to Indian soil. He tells Randy Diggs:

It was India's historic destiny that many races and cultures and religions should flow to her, and that many a caravan should rest here..... one of the last was that of followers of Islam. They came here and settled for good. We brought art treasured with us, and India too was full of riches of her own precious heritage. We gave her what she needed most precious gift from Islam's treasures, message of human equality. Full eleven centuries have passed since then. Islam now claims on the soil of India as Hinduism. Tharoor (2001)

Lakshman also makes comments on Hindu fundamentalism and its impact on Indian society. He describes the greatness and liberalism of the Hindu religion. He says that "he belongs to the only major religion in the world that does not claim to be the only true religion," Tharoor (2001) unlike Muslim and Christian. He finds it very strange "how can such a religion lend itself to fundamentalism," Tharoor (2001) because "it is a creed that is free of the restrictive dogmas of holy writ that refuses to be shackled to the limitation of a single holy book" Tharoor (2001). He further says that although Hinduism has faced several invasions, it has not suffered a fatal blow because of "large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism..... is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stones," Tharoor (2001) so fundamentalism is little bit odd for Hinduism. Lakshman says:

Actually, it's a bit odd to speak of "Hindu fundamentalism", because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred book. The name itself denotes something less, and more, than a set of theological beliefs. Tharoor (2001)

Through his novel *Riot*, Tharoor goes deep into the subtleties of power politics in contemporary India in the backdrop of the Hindu nationalist's version of cultural revivalism, the rise of Hindu Militancy, and the demolition of the sixteenth-century mosque in Ayodhya. Writers like Khuswant Singh had long ago looked at the realities of religious communal tension with straightforward narratives; Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* contains the ingredients of satire on the abettors and accomplices of communal tension. But Tharoor's *Riot* is, as Mr. Tripathi writes in *The Asian Wall Street Journal* in 2001, the reflection of deft handling of the complicated problem presented with "an accurate picture of the thinking of the various forces that are competing for the supremacy in contemporary India" (Tripathi, <http://shashitharoor.com>). *Riot* is a comment on the political scenario of current India and on the aggressive forces which again took birth in the wake of the Ram Janambhoomi Babari Masjid episode. He seems to leave a message through the novel, by quoting Iqbal "Na samjhogey to mit jaogey aye Hindostan walon/ Tumhari dastaan tak bhina na rahegi daastanon mein. If you don't understand, o you Indians, you will be destroyed. Your story will not remain in the world's treasury of stories" [Tharoor \(2001\)](#).

Tharoor asks for more contribution and determination to maintain India's integrity and diversity. As he depicts through Gurinder's father: "The whole point about India is that this is a country for everybody and everybody has the duty, the obligation to work to keep it that way" [Tharoor \(2001\)](#).

Tharoor in *Riot* has presented the Ram Sila Poojan program in the wake of the Ram Janambhoomi Movement. Manju Kapur in her second novel *A Married Woman* has presented the whole Ram Janambhoomi – Babari Mosque episode followed by severe riot in India as a secondary theme. Though the major focus is on the quest for the identity of a woman, in the background of that quest, the Ayodhya episode is portrayed. Through the turmoil of the family life of Astha, the protagonist of the novel, Kapur has presented the communal turmoil of India and its effect on society.

*A Married Woman* is the story of Astha an educated upper middle-class woman. Manju Kapur records every major incident that happens in the wake of the Ram Janambhoomi Mandir – Babari Masjid episode (collection of consecrated bricks, Rath Yatra, Kar Seva, and the demolition of Babari Mosque). Though it does not record any communal riot it successfully records the worst incident that engulfed the life of thousands of people not only in India but also abroad. The novel also revealed how political parties used religious sentiment for their own political purposes whether communalists or secularists.

In *A Married Woman*, the author blames the British policy of 'divide and rule' for the division of Hindus and Muslims, "We have seen what the British succeeded in doing. They believe in 'divide and rule'. They ploughed rivers of blood through our country. The same dark forces threaten us now. It is politicians who are creating religious insecurities to get votes" [Kapur \(2002\)](#). Both Kapur and Tharoor portrayed that politicians are using history to acquire power because history has two faceted functions it "can be used to build or to destroy" [Kapur \(2002\)](#). Manju Kapur in *A Married Woman* is of the view that politicians are using history to destroy the composite culture of India, Indian diversity, and the Indian tradition of tolerance. The appeasement policy and soft handling of a serious matter is only an election ploy to get votes to remain in power "The locks on the Masjid were opened to appease Hindu sentiments. Then the Muslim Woman's Bill was introduced twenty-five days later in Parliament to appease Muslim sentiments. Basically, both communities were pondered as an election ploy" [Kapur \(2002\)](#). She condemns "both

BJP and the Congress is encouraging fascist forces in the country and in failing to take quick action against the threats to the Babari Mosque” [Kapur \(2002\)](#).

Along with the political system the novelist of *A Married Woman* also portrays the role of police in the communal riots and the ways their treatment sows the seeds of the next communal riot. Astha’s visit to Ayodhya reveals to her the bitter fact that “the officials in the state police who feel it their duty to personally assist all those similarly inclined” [Kapur \(2002\)](#).

Along with portraying the Ayodhya episode and the demolition of Babari Mosque, Manju Kapur also portrays that small activist group, who worked day and night to keep normalcy and harmony in India through the character of Aijaz, Pipee, Astha, and the activist of Street Theatre Group. Kapur through her novel tries to give the message that have to recognize to real foe of society and to be responsible. She says, “For how long will they loot my village?/ Taking a torch I will go/ Through the world I will wonder/ To make my village safe for me” [Kapur \(2002\)](#).

Through her novel, Manju Kapur tries to depict selfish political leaders and vote bank politics as the root cause behind the communal problems in India in recent times. It is for their own purpose that political leaders “encourage social division along religious lines,” [Kapur \(2002\)](#). And along with it She shifts responsibility on citizens of India to recognize such dividing forces and appeals to work unitedly to fight with communal forces so that India can be made free from any kind of communal hatred and discrimination, as intended in the above four lines.

Shashi Tharoor and Manju Kapur both portrayed Ram Mandir and Babri Masjid episodes in their novels but Shiv K. Kumar takes the 1984 Anti-Sikh riots as the background of his novel *Two Mirrors at the Ashram*. It is a “veiled commentary on the Indian society torn between the forces of modernity – materialism, consumerism, sexual freedom- and at the same traditionalism. The novel convincingly portrays the contemporary modern ‘Waste Land’ where values of honesty, piety, care, and commitment are overlooked in favor of selfish motives” (Singh, Jyoti). The Protagonist of the novel Rajesh Sahani – novelist, habitual drinker, womanizer, and atheist – enters into the sylvan ashram of Swami Shanti Swaroop at Mullagarhi in remote south India, in search of characters and story for his next book, goes through a spiritual journey and transformation. Along with the spiritual journey of Rajesh, Shiv K. Kumar has presented the violent Delhi of 1984 against the Sikh community in the wake of the assassination of Indira Gandhi. *Two Mirrors at the Ashram* records the pictures of arson and murder and miseries of Sikhs during 1984. It depicts the Hindu-Sikh communal relation of those days and succeeds in arousing our sympathy for those who were murdered or suffered in Anti Sikh communal riot.

The communal holocaust that followed the death of Indira Gandhi was “as devastating as the one that followed the partition in 1947” [Kumar \(2006\)](#). Because it left the entire Sikh community to go through the same experience as they faced or witnessed during partition. Like other riots the anti-Sikh riots was a political manifestation of public anger against a community.

To conclude we can say Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* meditates on the communalism in recent times, over the issue of Ram Janambhoomi Babari Masjid. Like the other novelists of the past, he also talks about the association of political leaders with communal forces. He counts the British ‘divide and rule’ as the root cause of hatred in pre-independence India and finds the happening in recent India through communal forces. *Riot* is a comment on the political situation of India. It is a comment on those who blindly believe their leaders who on the other hand beguiling them for their own purpose. He seems to ask for more contribution and

determination to maintain India's integrity. Like Rushdie, he also advocates that History should not be treated as a dead end because it is not a record of what happened but what is recorded in text, books, literature, and other mediums. It has to be treated as a discourse and instead of proving anything; there should be a kind of churning for the solution of problems. Manju Kapur's *A Married Woman* also deals with the Ayodhya issue and growing aggressive nationalism. Like Tharoor, Manju Kapur also counts politics and political games as the root cause of communal hatred. She blames the appeasement of the government for violent Hindu and Muslim forces which gives them chances to rise. On communal issues, Kapur speaks as someone who had lived through the unrest of communal violence. The novel gives the view that the secularism of India will stand or fall depending on the courage and clout of those willing to fight the aggressor in the name of tolerance and liberty. Shiv K. Kumar in his *Two Mirrors at the Ashram* presents the anti-Sikh riot of 1984. It presents the idea that communal violence is a kind of reaction that gets burst against hidden anger against a particular community.

### **CONFLICT OF INTERESTS**

None.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

None.

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