

## Dialogic and Novel: A Study of Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

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### Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* exemplifies dialogism which is based on Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. Bakhtin believes that novel is not monologic rather it is polyphonic. Bakhtin believes that novel as a form is dialogical or heteroglot. The polyphonic novel provides enough ground to take different perspectives into account other than the perspectives of the novelist.

The novel has rich elements of heteroglossia too. This heteroglossia presents the form in which different dialogues are presented. Bakhtin names it the social diversity of speech types that he discovered in the novel. The nature of the form of the *Riot* is dialogic which allows other voices to participate in the novel. The heteroglossia helps achieve multiple realities rather than one definitive unchanging meaning imported by the novelist.

The heteroglossia in the novel is clear when there are different points of view presented by different social classes regarding the history of India. These different speeches represented by different social classes often clash with each other. It is difficult to appreciate the novel without taking into account the historical perspective. History is treated as fiction. Tharoor seems to have a wonderful understanding of history of India as well as the present political system.

Bakhtin believes that all thoughts are a matter of 'dialogue' and 'difference': dialogue requires the pre-existence of differences, which are then connected by an act of communication to generate new ideas and positions. In *Riot* too the dialogues between Ram Charan and Randy Diggs help to ascertain the pre-existing differences and through their communication new ideas are generated about it.

**Key Words:** polyphonic, heteroglossia, dialogism, monologic, metafiction

ShashiTharoor's *Riot* is a wonderful example of dialogism that is based on Bakhtin's concept of polyphony. As Bakhtin believes that novel is not monologic rather polyphonic, Tharoor's *Riot* advocates this concept of Bakhtin very strongly. *Riot* has different voices and points of view other than that of the narrator.

Bakhtin believes that novel as a form is dialogical or heteroglot. He borrowed the concept of polyphony from music and expanded it for literary theory and criticism. In music, polyphony stands for a piece that has more than one voice, melody or theme. These different components, like melody, voice and theme, have an equal importance though different from each other in nature. Like music, the novel too has different voices which are equally important and cannot merge with each other. The absence of any of them may distort the form and charm of the novel.

The polyphonic novel provides enough ground to take different perspectives into account other than the perspectives of the novelist. The origin of polyphony is in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, the text where Bakhtin drew a distinction between 'monologic' and 'polyphonic'.

*Riot* can also be seen as a historiographic met fiction or post-modernist fiction as there are many intertextual references and allusions in the novel. Nanda Kumar in an article titled "Multiplicity of Voices in the novels of Shashi Tharoor" comments: "In short, with its intertextual references and allusions, with its sophisticated awareness of its own reflexivity, *Riot* is quite in tune with much of the metafictional writings of today" (Kumar, 2007). Another critic, Paras Dhir, says: "Nonetheless, taking history as its base, Tharoor revisits the past with objectivity and irony, and transforms it into historiographicmetafiction which problematizes history by presenting historical incidents and characters...." (Dhir, 2009)

Polyphony includes the plurality of speech. It operates not only with the transcribed dialogues among the characters but also the implicit voices of the characters i.e. the thoughts and consciousness of the different characters. It also includes the implicit and explicit voices of the novelist and even the voices of the readers. The readers engage in dialogue with the text and communicate with it. The reader is also a very important voice that Bakhtin has taken into account as he is the most active voice responding to the text.

The novel has rich elements of heteroglossia too. This heteroglossia presents the form in which different dialogues are presented. Bakhtin names it the social diversity of speech types that he discovered in the novel. The nature of the form of the *Riot* is dialogic which allows other voices to participate in the novel. It provides the readers with other interesting dimensions of a particular subject that the novelist deals with in the novel. The heteroglossia helps achieve multiple realities rather than one definitive unchanging meaning imported by the novelist.

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taking into account the historical perspective. History is treated as fiction. Tharoor seems to have a wonderful understanding of history of India as well as the present political system. The same views are also put forward in a book review posted by SanjeevKotnala: *"There is a deep understanding of the historic and relevant contemporary facts and incidents"* (Kotnala, 2011). ParasDhir also shares this view: *"...Hence the historical events as well as the fictional happenings depicted in the novel offers multiplicity of perspectives and provide different versions of historical as well as the fictional truth"* (Dhir, Op. cit.).

One of the voices in the novel that of Rudyard's comments briefly on the history of Coca Cola in India and FERA, the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, 1973. Rudyard is the father of Priscilla. He was sent on a business mission to India at the same time by Coca Cola. He also tells about the political ups and downs of the time and how it led to emergency imposed by Indira Gandhi. Though he tells all this from the business point of view, his narration records some of the very crucial moments from the history of India. ShashiTharoor quotes the following as the words of George Fernandez during a parliamentary session: *"What kind of country is India, where you can get coke in the cities but no clean drinking water in the villages?"* (Tharoor, 2001:31)

Bakhtin believes that all thoughts are a matter of 'dialogue' and 'difference': dialogue requires the pre-existence of differences, which are then connected by an act of communication to generate new ideas and positions. In *Riot* too the dialogues between Ram Charan and Randy Diggs help to ascertain the pre-existing differences and through their communication new ideas are generated about it as Ram Charan thinks that even the KashiVishwanath temple was destroyed by the Muslims and the GyanVyapi mosque was replaced in its place by them.

The plurality of India's cultures is an important aspect of the novel that adds meaning to the polyphonic nature of the novel. The dialogues among the different voices on the culture of India present a kind of analogy that one can adopt to understand the pluralistic Indian society. As a polyphonic novel requires the participation of all the cultural voices, Tharoor has very successfully presented a contrast between the culture of the East and the West, a contrast between the Orient and the Occident.

The eastern culture is represented by Lakshman who stands for India's cultural values. The west is represented by Priscilla who came to India with her own cultural values. Amrendra K Sharma and Manju Roy have also put forward the same views: *"Further, the relationship between Indian civil servant and the American researcher leads to the perennial conflicts between the Oriental values and the Western perception of truth"* (Sharma and Roy, 2010:02). The same views are presented by Nanda Kumar in an article *"Multiplicity of Voices in the novels of ShashiTharoor"*:

*...The conflict between Lakshman and Priscilla is the conflict between the Victorian ideals of duty, responsibility and respectability, and the Romantic credo of freedom, love and individual fulfillment. Or to put it in another way, it is the conflict between the East and the West. (Kumar, Op. cit.)*

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 himself speaks of three voices operating explicitly in this novel in an interview given to Joanne J. Myers:

*... The story of the riot itself is told through three voices: the Hindu chauvinist leader of the town, who speaks with passion about his convictions about the wrong that he is trying to right; the district administrator of the town, who talks about trying to control what happened; and the superintendent of police, who had the responsibility for managing the breakdown in law and order. (Myers, 2001)*

Yet the writer has left many issues for the readers which can only be guessed. For example the mystery of the murder of Priscilla is not resolved by any of the polyphonic voices until the end of the novel.

The words of Priscilla show how language and utterance are interlinked with each other and cannot be separated from each other. Language carries an ideology within itself. The words have socially charged meanings that have their contextual meaning in the society. Bakhtin believes that ideology is semiotic in form and ideas do not exist apart from the medium of language. The form taken by and the ideology of the literary work are inseparable. Form is ideological at the same time that ideology must take some form. That is what Bakhtin calls "sociological stylistics". The heteroglossia of the novel is revealed by Priscilla's comment on the role of the Indian women in the society. Priscilla has brought her own ideology that is related to the social and intellectual class in which she is born and raised.

The dialogues of different characters throw light on the heteroglot nature of the novel that rises from the very use of their language made of different syntactical items wrapped in its socio-cultural contexts and ideology.

In the polyphonic novel, different modes of narrative such as realism, naturalism, fantasy and postmodernism play a vital role. *Riot* also offers an amalgam of these different genres.

Lakshman fantasizes his love with Priscilla while his responsibilities towards his family are the part of realism. The two voices of realism and fantasy are very apt in the novel.

This variety of dialogism which is borne out of the variety of the usage of language adds to the heteroglossia of the novel. Different characters of the novel perceive the world from their own perspectives which are obviously contradictory to each other. There are differences in the perception of the people.

Ram Charan comes with his own religious background. He finds himself to be perfect according to the ideologies he is governed with. He finds nothing wrong in taking out a procession to build a temple or to massacre the Muslims. Lakshman brings his own set of values which are not charged by the orthodox religious identity and instincts but by his own secular outlook, upbringing and education. It does not allow his conscience to meddle up with the religious orthodox.

Priscilla comes with her own social and cultural background. She feels uncomfortable with an unfamiliar culture and people. Sarwar, despite being a communist, has sympathy for his religion and has his own set of ideology. Gurinder also brings certain set of ideas which are governed by his past particularly the death of his nephew and brother-in-law during the anti-sikh riot. Katherine and Rudyard see the life from their own perspective. *Riot* represents these different voices in the form of dialogues which often clash with each other and impart different insights and meaning to the novel.

Throughout the novel, the narrative voice moves between two types of discourse - literary discourse and oral discourse. In it the narrative voice points towards an objective style of speech - relating the action as something happen to someone else, to the characters, society or an institution. The readers can detect a separation between the situation of the voice telling the tale and the situation voices within the tale.

The narrator also becomes one of the voices coming from the tale. At times, the oral voice will emerge from within a literary passage, as it does in the sequence predicting the cause of the murder of Priscilla. The narrative sequence raises many questions in the mind of the reader that sometimes leads him to an imaginative conclusion while other times he rejects his own presumptions as the narrative sequence presents another point of view that makes the reader feel the other way round.

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