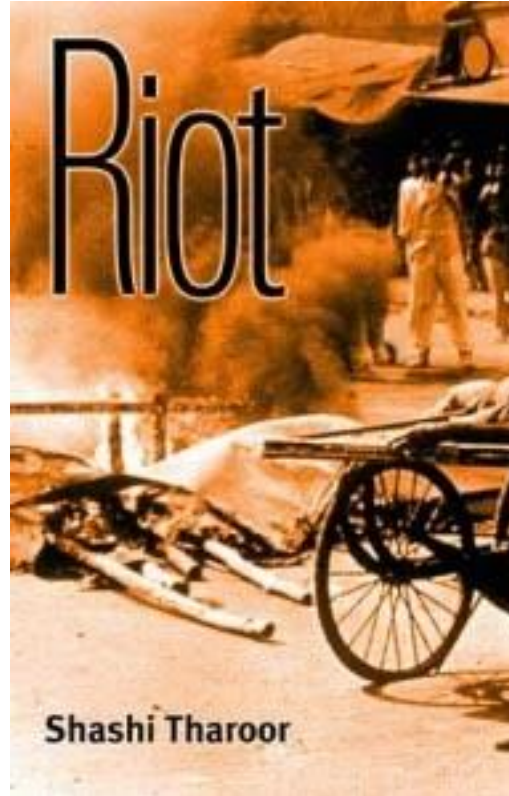


## A Study on Communal Violence in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* and Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*

B. Jeyapushpa, M.A., B.Ed., M.Phil.

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### Abstract

Shashi Tharoor and Raj Kamal Jha are contemporary writers of Indian Writing in English. Their novels mostly focus on contemporary social and political issues that affect the common man. Their works spin around the social evils concurrent in society as obstacles for the growth of the nation. Tharoor's *Riot* centres on the riot of communal clashes. He portrays how the clashes between two religions groups results in a riot in which a number of innocent lives become the prey. By presenting voices from both the Hindu and the Muslim communities, he tries to prove how history is misled by personal favours. Jha's *Fireproof* presents the brutal reality of communal violence. It portrays how innocent people are butchered by the mob. Jha

wants to prove wrong the general opinion that the communal riot is carried out only by the illiterates. He insists that it is the participation of literates which is the most dangerous for a civilized country like India. The author also lashes out at the judicial system which remains motionless during riots. Both the writers focus on the brutal reality of communal violence and insist the need for change in the mindset of people.

**Key words:** riot, communal violence, secularism, mob mentality, history, social reform

## **Introduction**

Indian English Literature has come into existence as an interesting by-product of an eventful fusion taking place in the eighteenth century between a vast expanding and enterprising British Literature and Indian Literature. Indian writing in English refers to the body of work by writers in India who write in the English language and whose native language could be one of the numerous languages spoken in India.

## **Sashi Tharoor and Raj Kamal Jha**

Shashi Tharoor (1956- ) has gained a unique position in the field of Indian Writing in English as his novels focus on contemporary social issues. Tharoor has authored fifteen bestselling works of fiction and non-fiction since 1981, all of which are concentrated on India and its history, culture, film, politics, social issues, foreign policy and more. Raj Kamal Jha is a courageous writer. As a journalist and as a writer, he follows his sense of righteousness and gives voice to the silenced and the oppressed people. With impressive visual force, he proves how powerful a work of literature can be. His writing style is very simple and engages the readers with the subject. Jha's fiction is known for its stark simplicity and ability to evoke emotions. Jha's fiction is strongly rooted in contemporary Indian themes. Jha's novels engage with many social themes beginning with domestic violence, the urban-rural divide and communal strife which is unusual in many of the contemporary writings in English. Jha's work captures those realities of India that escape the mainstream media. Tharoor and Jha are novelists of Post-Independence India. Their writings are filled with concern for society, especially for the silenced and the downtrodden people. Both of them show their anxiety to have a society where

people live in peaceful reconciliation. They reach out to the readers to understand and realize the need for change in an intellectually forward nation like India.

### **Focus on Communalism**

The ugly problem of communalism is one of the burning issues of post-colonial India. Though the seeds of communalism were nurtured by the different rulers, domestic and foreign invaders, long before the British came to rule India, it has been aggravated by the present politicians of post-colonial India. Communal violence has increased quantitatively and qualitatively ever since politics came to be communalised. It is evident from the destruction of Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 that religion was used as a tool to gain political power. At present, violence has become an inescapable reality for an ordinary Indian and one cannot escape being sickened by the daily occurrences of riots, rapes and murders by those who believe their political power confers immunity on them. There are rampant incidents of powerful persons who take the law into their own hands. Though individual police officers, administrators and judges have shown courage and commitment in the pursuit of justice, the democratic Indian state as a whole seems to be able to do little to end such occurrences.

### **Religious Sentiments and Conflicts in *Riot***

Tharoor's *Riot* is set against the historical background of religious tensions in India in 1989, when Hindus and Muslims clashed in bloody riots over Ram Shila Poojan, the object of controversy of a four hundred year old mosque, the Babri Masjid, which the Hindu zealots eventually destroyed in 1992. The Hindu epic, *The Ramayana*, states that Lord Ram was born in Ayodhya, a small town in northern India. It is believed that at the birth place of Lord Ram stood the magnificent Ramjanmabhoomi temple thronged by Hindu devotees for centuries. Many Hindus believe that in the sixteenth century, a Muslim King, Muhammad Babar, knocked down the Ramjanmabhoomi temple and in its place built a big mosque called the Babri Masjid. During the time of partition, when Muslims migrated to Pakistan, a group of Hindus claimed that an idol of Lord Ram had emerged in the disputed site. The dispute went to the court. The District Magistrate simply put a padlock on the temple, and said neither Hindus nor Muslims could worship there. But there were some Hindu fundamentalists who wanted to rebuild the temple of Lord Ram in that site. This led to a riot that reverberated throughout the country, in which the lives of thousands of Muslims and Hindus were lost.

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### **Priscilla Hart's Story**

*Riot* narrates the life of a twenty-four year old Priscilla Hart, an idealistic, pretty, blue eyed American who comes to Zalilgarh, India to work as a volunteer for HELP- US (Health, Education, Literacy, and Population - United States), an NGO, working to control population explosion. In Zalilgarh, she falls in love with a married man called Lakshman, who is a District Magistrate and begins an affair with him. One day, when Priscilla waits in a place they usually meet, she is brutally stabbed by some unknown person who is not revealed till the very end of the novel. Her murder takes place at a time when the communal frenzy is running high. The search for Priscilla's murderer runs parallel with the search for the murderers of two locals whose death had sparked the riots and along with that, there is a search for the historical facts about the Ramjanmabhoomi - Babri Masjid issue.

### **Outbreak of Communal Tension and Riot**

Priscilla's estranged parents Mr. Rudyard Hart and Mrs. Katherine Hart come to visit Zalilgarh along with a journalist. The story unfolds through the investigation of an American journalist, Randy Diggs who is looking for a story for the western media. In Zalilgarh, he meets the local chauvinistic Hindu fundamental leader Ram Charan Gupta, the Professor Mohammad Sarwar, Lakshman, and Gurinder Singh to investigate the politics behind the riot. Ram Charan Gupta is a staunch Hindu fundamentalist. For him, September 15, 1989 was a great day - a day when the Hindutva forces launched the "Ram Sila Poojan Programme". (R 52) On that sanctified day, bricks inscribed with 'Ram' are consecrated at the local shrine, to be transported to Ayodhya to rebuild the Ramjanmabhoomi temple. When the Hindu youths engage in preparing banners for the next day's procession, they are stabbed by some unknown men. As it agitates the Hindu leaders, the District Magistrate, and the Superintendent of Police pressure the leaders to postpone the procession, but they are not ready to withdraw. In the end, permission is granted on the condition that they would not shout inflammatory slogans against Muslims and would not use cymbals and drums near mosques. The leaders agree, but when the procession begins, the masses go out of control and in a frenzied mood they attack the mosques. The crowd

runs amok and Zailgarh indulges in full-scale communal violence. Police open fire to control the mobs and eight people are found dead at the end of the day.

### **Two Distinct Voices – How History Inflames Communal Passions**

Tharoor uses two distinct voices of Ram Charan Gupta and Professor Mohammad Sarwar to prove how history can inflame communal passions and how it can also allay communal hatred. Gupta also affirms that in olden days a great temple stood at the specified site. There are legends that pilgrims from all over India would come to worship Ram there. But a Muslim king, the Mughal emperor Babar, a foreigner from central Asia, knocked it down and in its place he built a big mosque, which was named after him, the Babri Masjid. Gupta vehemently blames Muslims as being responsible for the partition of the sub-continent. He says, “Now these Muslims have already divided our country once, to create their accursed Pakistan on the sacred soil of our civilization”. (R 55) Gupta wishes to bring back the era of Ram by re-establishing the Ram Janmabhoomi, “no matter how many lives have to be sacrificed to ensure it”. (R 124) The comment is ironical, for the reign of Lord Ram was associated with an era of peace, love, compassion and humanity, but the fanatic Hindu leader seeks to re-establish it by butchering the lives of innocent people.

### **How History Can Be Used to Allay Communal Passions**

Professor Mohammed Sarwar’s conversation with Lakshman, instructs how history can be used to allay communal passions. Being a faithful Historian, Sarwar in his interview with Randy Diggs often quotes Mohammad Iqbal, the great Urdu poet who wrote “Ours is a civilization that will commit suicide out of its own complexity; he who builds a nest on frail branches is doomed to destruction”. (R 67) He points out that Muslims are part of the indivisible unity that is Indian nationality. Without them the splendid structure of India is incomplete. They are the essential element, which has gone into the building India. Sarwar does not represent Muslim’s opinion but he believes that historians with a secular soul have a duty to retrieve historical figures, especially Muslims from oblivion to forge Hindu-Muslim unity. Professor Sarwar vigorously says, “Muslims didn’t partition the country - the British did, the Muslim League did, and the Congress Party did”. (R 111) In fact, most of the country’s Islamic leaders like Maulana Maudoodi were bitterly opposed to the movement for Pakistan. They felt that Islam

should prevail over the world as a whole. “Pakistan was created by “bad” Muslims, secular Muslims, not by the “good” Muslims in whose name Pakistan now claims to speak”. (R 109)

### **Faith vs Historical Facts**

Ram Charan Gupta's approach is based on faith rather than on the historical facts about the mosque. People like Ram Charan Gupta believe that history has done them much wrong. They want to take revenge on history, but they forget to take into account that the history in itself is revenge. Ram Charan Gupta is an extremist firebrand Hindu who feels that even the Taj Mahal is actually a Hindu temple. But Professor Sarwar believes in India's pluralism. Tharoor gives his views from both the Hindu and the Muslim camps and uses Lakshman's conversation with Priscilla Hart, to speak out his mind. Ram Charan's voice is often contradicted by the secular minded Lakshman who knows more about his religion and culture. He believes that Hinduism has no place for fundamentalism. In fact, it is a religion without fundamentals.

Lakshman wonders why Muslims are being assaulted for something that happened over four hundred and fifty years ago. He rightly remarks that it is because “politicians of all faiths across India seek to mobilize votes by appealing to narrow identities”. (R 145) By seeking votes in the name of religion, caste and region, they have urged voters to define themselves on these lines.

### **Far More Important Things to Consider**

Tharoor seems to project that while people are butchering each other on the issues of Mandir and Masjid, while they are worthlessly slitting the throats of people of other communities in the name of Ram and Allah, there are things far more important which need to be attended to. Through this, he focusses on the plight of women which need to be given more importance. He insists that women should be given equal rights and respect in the society. The novelist wants to convey that Ram Mandir or Babri Masjid will not fetch them a better life nor will it do any good in furnishing their needs.

### **Irony**

*Riot* is the re-examination of accepted history with an eye towards updating it with newly discovered, more accurate, or less-biased information. Taking history as its base, Tharoor revisits the past with objectivity and irony. History is not a monolith. There are discontinuous and contradictory histories. Historians can no longer claim that their study of the past is detached and objective. The Historical situation cannot be transcended. The past is not something that confronts as if it were a physical object, but it is something that is constructed from already written text of all kinds. History is always a matter of telling a story about the past, using other texts as inter-texts. History is not a matter of dates and great events but of politics, power, authority and subversion.

### **Contextualizing India's Past**

Shashi Tharoor has attempted to contextualize India's past, to interpret and understand it better so as to redeem the present that continues to pacify the fires of communal strife. Though religion laid the basis for the partition of India, Tharoor says that at no time did the Indian Constitution endorse that India is only for the Hindus and not for Muslims. India is a country for everybody and every faith has as much a place in the Indian mosaic as the majority faith. He wants to emphasize that an Indian Muslim is as much an Indian as an Indian Hindu. If both the communities have faith in this view of Tharoor, the dawn of communal harmony in India cannot be far away. Tharoor aptly quotes the words of Iqbal at the end of the novel, "if you don't understand, O you Indians, you will be destroyed. Your story will not remain in the world's treasury of stories". (R 258)

### **A Balanced Picture of the Views**

The beauty of the novel lies in the way the author paints a very balanced picture of the views of the different communities. It is about the majority community, the Hindus trying to establish and reinforce their identity and the minority community, the Muslims want to maintain theirs. Each and every issue is politicized in the novel.

### **Ordeals of Communal Violence in *Fireproof***

Raj Kamal Jha's *Fireproof*, published in 2006 is set against the backdrop of the Gujarat communal carnage of 2002 that documents the brutal facts about one of the worst sectarian riots

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in India since partition of the country in 1947. On February 27, 2002, a carriage of the Sabarmathi Express train, carrying Hindu pilgrims from Ayodhya travelled through Gujarat and was set on fire near Godhra causing the death of fifty nine Hindu passengers. This aroused a call for a strike the following day to protest against the killings. This strike turned into an attack on Muslims that continued for a month and led to the deaths of over a thousand people. More than seventy percent were Muslims and several others were forced to flee from their homes and seek shelter in the refugee camps. Jha has a firsthand experience of the brutal facts of the riot as he visited Ahmedabad in the aftermath of the event.



### **Begins in Ahmedabad – Birth of a Deformed Child**

*Fireproof* starts in Ahmedabad on the night of February 28, 2002. The novel opens in the Holy Angel Hospital in Ahmedabad where Jay, the narrator, is waiting outside the operating theatre for his wife to deliver a child. The doctors tell him about the deformed child his wife has

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delivered. The child is not a merely child but also a metaphor. The child can witness and weep but do nothing more. He christens the child Ithim. He chooses this name because the child is so profoundly malformed that Jay reasons some people will see him as ‘It’ while others will see him as ‘Him’. The physical incompleteness and the deformity of Ithim symbolize the ghastly, bizarre face of communal violence that makes people limbless and crippled. But the fully grown eyes and eyes-brows of the baby symbolize stranded people who become witnesses as passive spectators of the violence. “Each eye of the baby was perfectly shaped, fully functional. His eyebrows were perfect, too, as if drawn by an artist. . . . The rest of the baby was a mess”. (F 13)



### **Mysterious and Intriguing Emails**

At night, he gets a call from Miss Glass. She asks him to come to the railway station the next evening and follow her instructions if he wants to set his child right. She also asks him to read her email before coming to the railway station. The email also contains three attachments- “Tariq.Doc., Shabnam.Doc. and Abba.Doc” (F 163). These files, in the words of Miss Glass, are “about three people from last night who were not so lucky”. (F 165) The Tariq Document contains the story of a teenage boy Tariq whose mother is first raped brutally and then burnt alive in front of his eyes by four gentleman-looking people - A, B, C and D. Shabnam Document

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narrates the atrocities inflicted on the parents of an adolescent girl called Shabnam before her eyes. Abba Document is about Abba, an old retired teacher, before whose eyes the gang of four rapes his pregnant daughter-in-law, rips the unborn child from her belly and throws it on the oven before strangulating and burning her. Miss Glass, Doctors and Head Nurse plan to give this mutilated unborn child to Jay, the narrator, whom the daughter-in-Law recognizes as “one of the four” who came to her house “earlier that evening” (F 353) and played havoc with her life before her aged father-in-law. As they convict Jay to accept the deformed baby as his own child, Miss Glass asks him to come to the railway station next evening by promising him to set his child right.

### **The Tent in The Hideout**

At the railway station, Jay meets “a dwarf, a midget man” (F 281) called Bright Shirt. Then Bright Shirt takes him to a place called The Tent in The Hideout. There in The Tent, the victims of the communal violence are gathered to witness the trial of the dead carried out by Miss Glass. During the trial, objects like book, towel and watch bear testimony against the atrocities inflicted on common people by bigots.

### **Eyewitnesses and Earwitnesses**

Miss Glass presents Book, Watch and Towel as “eyewitnesses” and “earwitnesses” (F 333) for the sake of utmost objectivity. As she explains: “They are here because they are eyewitnesses and they are earwitnesses. And unlike us, people who were killed, these three are objects. That’s why their story will be objective. And their words will, therefore, carry more weight”. (F 333) Book is eyewitness to what has happened to Tariq and his mother. Watch has seen the humiliation and murder of Shabnam’s parents. Towel has withstood the horror let loose on Abba, his daughter-in-law and her unborn child. All the three eyewitnesses claim they can recognize the four criminals- A, B, C and D - involved in these three particular crimes. During the trial, Jay turns out to be B who just watched the other three committing the crimes. At the end of the play, Glass discloses that Ithim, the deformed child, is not actually Jay’s baby born to his wife in the hospital the previous night. It is rather the unborn child of a pregnant woman who has been mutilated and murdered by Jay and his cronies during the riots. Jay’s taking care of Ithim as his own child for a whole day is pronounced to be his punishment by the dead.

### **I can choose what to forget**

Jay runs away instantly after realizing the eerie nature of the people around him in The Tent, reminding the reader never to believe the word of the dead as they are meant to entrap the living. He does not confess his involvement in the crime even to his dead mother who comes in his dream and asks what really happened “that afternoon, that evening and that night before you went to the hospital with your wife”. (F 364) This measured silence on his part before his mother with whom he shares everything speaks loudly against him. He rather tells the reader unabashedly: “There is no burden I carry, whatever the dead may say. Because I am alive, I can choose what to remember, I can choose what to forget”. (F 372)

### **Callous Attitude of the Powers towards Communal Violence**

While running back to the city, Jay finds people crying. He wants to tell them: “keep crying, collect your tears to fight the fire because there is no water, there is no Miss Glass, there is no Bright Shirt and there is no Hideout. Or if there is, go there, go play, go watch a circus, go watch Juggler, don’t just sit here and cry”. (F 362) Thus, he reduces the whole aura of impartial justice to mere jugglery and peep show. Like the living, Miss Glass too pats her back for punishing Jay, the least offender, while letting the big fish remain out of the net. *Fireproof* draws attention to the callous attitude of the powers towards the victims of communal violence and also hints at the complicity of the administration in fermenting communal hatred.

Communal violence is a threat to the existence of the whole of humanity. It is a threat to the secular values and composite culture of the nation. India is a secular nation where everyone is free to follow the religion of his/her choice without any discrimination and the constitution provides this liberty because there is no state religion in the country. Violence is not an inherent characteristic of human nature, but emerges from outside atmosphere due to the vested interests of some select people. Humanity should be taken as a whole to create a non-violent society. Violence occurs only when people are categorized under different groups, communal groups or sects. Hence efforts should be taken to create a sect-less, communal-less and group-less society only then the progress of humanity would be possible. People should not live only for one community, religion, region, language and country but in a broader context, for humanity.

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Humaneness without discrimination and respect for the people of other communities will help us avoid communal violence.

### **What do Tharoor and Jha Want to Communicate**

Thus the novelists Tharoor and Jha awaken the readers to realize the need of the hour which is to be humane to fellow beings. No one should be identified by their religion, caste or community. As per the constitution of India, every citizen of India has equal rights. There is no discrimination on the basis of religion. The authors convey that it is crucial for people to really change their mindset regarding religion, caste and community. Otherwise as an ancient poet rightly prophesies, “‘if you don’t understand, O you Indians, you will be destroyed. Your story will not remain in the world’s treasury of stories’”. (R 258)

Experience has repeatedly shown that wherever communal violence has occurred, it has nothing to do with belief, and everything to do with small-mindedness, utter lack of scruple, complete confidence in the infallibility of one’s own views and a vast capacity to manipulate public ignorance. Secularism can only be attained by peaceful co-existence of various religious groups. India is a traditional society that contains not one, but many traditions owing their origin in part to different religions. The remedy of constitutional safeguards to root out the chronic malaise of communalism will not have desired effect unless it is tackled by society. Enlightened citizens must discourage the communal based forces from the social, political and electoral process in order to make these forces irrelevant. They are to be opposed and not to be appeased. Secularism should begin in the heart of every individual. There should be no feeling of otherness as all have shared the same history.

During the freedom struggle, secularism was emerging as the most dominant principle. Under Jawaharlal Nehru and later under his successors in the Congress Party, the concept of a secular nation-state was officially adopted as India's path to political modernity and national integration. India has been declared a secular state by its written constitution and it is every Indians duty to stand by that and believe in this declaration.

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