

MEMORY AS RESISTANCE AND SURVIVAL: PERSONAL AND COLLECTIVE RECOLLECTION IN SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT: A LOVE STORY

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the function of memory—both personal and collective—in Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot: A Love Story* (2008), set against the backdrop of the 2002 Gujarat communal riots. Drawing exclusively on the novel's thematic and narrative content, the study argues that memory in Tharoor's text operates not merely as recollection but as a dynamic force of resistance, survival, and identity formation. The paper identifies three distinct modalities through which memory functions in the narrative: personal memory, which enables individual characters to process grief and love in the midst of violence; collective memory, which binds communities together even as it deepens their wounds; and selective memory, which serves as a psychological coping mechanism that simultaneously distorts and preserves truth. Through close reading of characters such as Iqbal, Anjali, Arvind, and Nisha, the paper traces how Tharoor foregrounds the unreliability and selectivity of memory as both a private and public phenomenon. The non-linear narrative structure of the novel—marked by flashbacks and temporal fragmentation—mirrors the psychological experience of trauma and reinforces the thesis that memory resists linear ordering. The paper further explores Tharoor's critique of how collective memory is manipulated by political actors in the aftermath of the riots, resulting in historical amnesia that silences the voices of victims. By situating personal recollection within the broader socio-political context of communal violence and identity politics in post-colonial India, Tharoor constructs memory as an act of moral reckoning. The study concludes that memory, in *Riot: A Love Story*, is both the wound and the means of surviving it.

Keywords: *memory, collective trauma, selective memory, communal violence, Shashi Tharoor, Indian Writing in English, postcolonial literature, Gujarat riots, identity, resistance*

INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Love Story* (2008) stands as one of the most significant fictional engagements with the 2002 Gujarat communal riots in Indian Writing in English. The novel situates a Hindu-Muslim love story within the historical catastrophe of the riots, using the personal to illuminate the political and the emotional to interrogate the historical. At the heart of

the novel's construction lies the theme of memory—a force that governs character psychology, narrative structure, and socio-political critique in equal measure. Memory in the text is neither stable nor passive; it is contested, fragmented, selective, and ultimately political. This paper undertakes a focused study of how Tharoor deploys memory as a narrative and thematic device, arguing that personal and collective forms of recollection together constitute a mode of resistance against erasure and a means of survival in the face of extreme violence.

Indian Writing in English has a long tradition of engaging with historical trauma through fiction, from Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* (1938) to Arundhati Roy's *The God of Small Things* (1997). Tharoor occupies a distinctive position within this tradition, bringing the analytical rigour of a diplomat and the imaginative resources of a novelist to bear upon one of independent India's most divisive episodes. *Riot: A Love Story* is notable for its non-linear narrative structure, its multiplicity of perspectives, and its sustained interrogation of how memory shapes both individual identity and collective history. This paper focuses specifically on the mechanics and ethics of memory in the novel, examining how characters use recollection as a tool for coping, resistance, and the preservation of personal truth.

Tharoor (2008) presents memory not as a neutral archive but as an emotionally charged and politically implicated force. The novel's treatment of memory is consistent with postcolonial literary traditions in which the past is never fully past. As Tharoor writes through one of his characters, 'The violence may be over, but the memory lingers, stubborn and unyielding' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 138). This formulation captures the dual nature of memory in the text: it is both burden and resistance, both wound and weapon. Roy (1997), in *The God of Small Things*, similarly uses memory as a structural and thematic device to interrogate the persistence of trauma across time. The non-linear narrative in Roy's novel, like Tharoor's, enacts the very fragmentation that characterises traumatic recollection. Tharoor's engagement with the selectivity of memory, particularly in the characterisation of Arvind and Nisha, echoes broader literary and theoretical concerns about how individuals negotiate painful pasts by remembering selectively.

Rao (1938), in *Kanthapura*, uses communal narrative voice to construct collective memory as a means of historical testimony. Tharoor develops this tradition further in *Riot: A Love Story* by distributing the burden of collective memory across multiple characters, each of whom holds a partial and perspectival account of the riots. The result is a mosaic of recollection that resists

singular or authoritative historical narration. Anand (1936), in *Coolie and Untouchable*, similarly uses individual suffering as a vehicle for collective social critique, a technique that Tharoor adapts to the context of communal violence. Ghosh (1988), in *The Shadow Lines*, interrogates the relationship between memory and national identity in the context of partition violence, anticipating Tharoor's concern with how communal events are remembered and misremembered across generations. The Human Rights Watch (2002) report on the Gujarat riots provides the factual substrate that undergirds Tharoor's fictional engagement, noting that the violence was organised and systematic, which in turn shapes the novel's critique of how official memory suppresses accountability.

PERSONAL MEMORY AND TRAUMATIC RECOLLECTION

Personal memory in *Riot: A Love Story* is characterised above all by its entanglement with love and loss. The protagonist Iqbal's recollection of Anjali is the primary instance of this entanglement. His memories of her are not merely nostalgic; they are structurally fused with the violence of the riots, so that beauty and horror become inseparable in his consciousness. Tharoor renders this fusion with precision: 'I will never forget the moment when I saw her face, the way it looked when the flames from the burning bodies lit up her face' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 112). The image is both intimate and catastrophic, capturing the novel's central argument that personal memory cannot be extricated from historical circumstance.

Iqbal's selective retention of this moment—choosing to remember Anjali's face rather than the full horror of the scene—represents what Tharoor identifies as selective memory functioning as a survival mechanism. The ability to recall love amidst violence becomes his method of enduring the psychological aftermath of the riots. This is not denial but a form of conscious or unconscious curation of experience, in which the self protects itself by foregrounding what sustains it. Memory thus functions as an emotional anchor, even as it remains tethered to pain. Arvind, another key character, exhibits a more elaborate form of selective memory. His recollections of his love for Nisha are similarly curated: 'The past was a collage, stitched together from different times, places, and people, where the violence stood at the centre, but the love and tenderness were relegated to the edges' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 145). The spatial metaphor of the collage is telling—memory in this formulation is not a chronological record but an aesthetic arrangement, shaped by desire and trauma in equal measure. Arvind's memory distorts the past not out of dishonesty but out of psychological necessity.

Nisha's memories operate similarly. She recalls moments of joy and companionship with Arvind while suppressing the social and political realities of their forbidden love. Her reflection—'In the distance between us, I found my peace, my escape' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 89)—reveals how memory can reconstruct experience so as to make it emotionally survivable. Tharoor's characterisation of both Arvind and Nisha suggests that selective memory is not a failure of cognition but a legitimate response to overwhelming circumstances, one that preserves a sense of self when the external world has become uninhabitable.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE COMMUNAL WOUND

Beyond individual recollection, Tharoor is equally concerned with the collective dimension of memory—the ways in which a community processes, retains, and transmits the experience of shared trauma. In *Riot: A Love Story*, the Gujarat riots become a shared memory that binds the affected community together even as it tears its social fabric apart. The novel distributes the narrative of the riots across multiple voices, none of which alone constitutes the full picture. Each character holds a fragment of the larger story, and it is the aggregation of these fragments that constitutes collective memory in Tharoor's rendering. One character's reflection captures the communal dimension of this memory: 'We will remember these moments forever; even when our bodies are gone, the memory of what happened here will remain' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 155). The claim is simultaneously consolatory and ominous, insisting on the permanence of traumatic memory as both testimony and burden. For Tharoor, collective memory is never simply the sum of individual recollections; it is a structure that outlives the individuals who compose it, embedding itself in communal identity in ways that resist resolution.

The political manipulation of collective memory is one of Tharoor's sharpest critiques in the novel. In the aftermath of the riots, official narratives constructed by state actors and political parties systematically distort the public record, suppressing evidence of state complicity and shifting blame onto minority communities. Arvind observes: 'The official memory of the riots was one of them against us, the outsiders against the insiders, the others who had destroyed the peace of our society' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 210). This critique exposes how collective memory can be weaponised—deployed not to preserve truth but to sustain power and enforce amnesia.

MEMORY, NARRATIVE STRUCTURE, AND TEMPORAL FRAGMENTATION

The non-linear structure of *Riot: A Love Story* is not merely a formal device; it is an enactment of memory's essential character. Memory does not operate chronologically; it resurfaces

unexpectedly, loops back upon itself, and refuses the neat sequencing that conventional narrative imposes. Tharoor's use of flashbacks to move between the pre-riot period, the riots themselves, and their aftermath mirrors the psychological reality of traumatic recollection, in which past events intrude upon the present without warning or resolution. One character reflects: 'What happened during those few days could not be forgotten, nor could it be explained. The time before the riots, when things seemed normal, now seemed like a dream, distant and unreal' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 77). The sense of temporal dislocation here is characteristic of traumatic memory: the pre-traumatic past becomes inaccessible, rendered unreal by the violence that succeeded it. Tharoor uses this experience of temporal disruption to argue that history, when it is violent, cannot be processed sequentially; it must be revisited, circled, and renegotiated over time.

Mandeep's reflection on the paradox of time as healer reinforces this argument: 'Healing takes time, they say. But for me, it seems that every passing day only makes the pain more distant yet more palpable, like an old wound that never fully closes' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 134). The image of the wound that does not close is central to the novel's treatment of memory. Time does not erase; it deepens, making the emotional residue of trauma more, not less, present in everyday life. Memory, in this formulation, is not an obstacle to healing but the site where healing—if it is to occur—must take place.

MEMORY AS RESISTANCE AND ETHICAL WITNESS

Tharoor ultimately constructs memory as a form of ethical resistance in *Riot: A Love Story*. To remember the riots—to insist on the accuracy of one's recollections against the grain of official history—is an act of moral courage. Characters who refuse to accept the distorted public narratives of the violence are cast as bearers of a counter-memory, one that preserves the experience of those who suffered at the expense of those who would prefer the matter forgotten. The journalist character Priscilla Hart articulates this position when she identifies the state's role in the violence: 'The violence is a product of a political agenda that seeks to divide us along religious lines. The state should be protecting its people, but here it is complicit in the violence' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 129).

Tharoor's conclusion on this point is unambiguous: 'The riot is not just a moment in time. It is a wound that we have decided to forget. But the wound will not heal until we acknowledge it' (Tharoor, 2008, p. 202). The imperative to acknowledge is simultaneously a call to remember—to refuse the convenience of historical amnesia in favour of the difficult work of bearing witness.

Memory, in this sense, is not only personal or collective; it is political and ethical, a demand placed upon individuals and communities to resist the erasure of painful truths.

CONCLUSION

This paper has argued that memory in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Love Story* functions simultaneously as survival mechanism, communal bond, political instrument, and ethical imperative. Through its examination of personal recollection in characters such as Iqbal, Arvind, and Nisha, and through its analysis of the collective memory that binds and divides the riot-affected community, the paper has demonstrated that Tharoor's engagement with memory is multilayered and politically conscious. The novel's non-linear structure enacts the fragmentation that characterises traumatic recollection, reinforcing the argument that memory resists the imposition of chronological order. Tharoor's critique of how official and political actors manipulate collective memory to suppress accountability adds an ethical urgency to the novel's treatment of recollection. *Riot: A Love Story* ultimately argues that memory—selective, fragmented, and contested as it inevitably is—remains the primary means by which individuals and communities survive, resist, and seek to reckon with historical violence. The novel's contribution to Indian Writing in English lies precisely in its insistence that the past cannot be safely relegated to history; it must be continuously remembered, interrogated, and acknowledged.

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