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Fragmented Histories and Epistemic Plurality: Postmodern Narrative Strategy in *Riot*

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Abstract

This paper aims at examining *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor through the intersecting frameworks of historiographic metafiction and postmodern epistemology, foregrounding how the novel destabilizes the authority of historical truth. Constructed as an assemblage of letters, diary entries, official memoranda, interviews, and journalistic reports, the narrative reconstructs communal unrest in North India while simultaneously interrogating the possibility of objective historiography. Rather than presenting a coherent and authoritative account of events, the novel disperses narrative authority across competing discursive voices, thereby exposing the instability of truth-claims embedded within archival production. Drawing upon Linda Hutcheon's theorization of historiographic metafiction, Lyotard's critique of metanarratives, and Foucauldian insights into discourse and power, this study argues that fragmentation in *Riot* functions as a deliberate epistemological intervention. The archive emerges as a contested site where memory, ideology, and institutional authority intersect, revealing the constructed nature of communal histories and nationalist myth-making. By resisting teleological closure and rejecting homogenizing narratives of religious identity, Tharoor sustains epistemic plurality as a democratic narrative ethic. Ultimately, *Riot* redefines fiction as a critical arena in which history is shown to be discursively mediated, perspectival, and perpetually open to reinterpretation within postcolonial India.

Keywords:

Epistemic Plurality; Historiographic Metafiction; Archive and Discourse; Postmodern Epistemology; Narrative Decentering; Nationalist Metanarratives

I. Introduction

Contemporary Indian English fiction has increasingly engaged with questions of history, memory, and national identity, particularly in response to the ideological shifts and communal anxieties that have marked post-Independence India. Within this evolving literary terrain, *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor occupies a distinctive position. Rather than presenting history as a coherent narrative of events, the novel reconstructs a moment of communal unrest through a collage of documentary fragments, thereby foregrounding the textual mediation of historical knowledge. In doing so, it aligns with a broader postmodern impulse in Indian English writing that interrogates the authority of official historiography and nationalist myth-making.

The novel is set against the volatile atmosphere surrounding communal tensions in North India during the late twentieth century, indirectly evoking the Ayodhya dispute as a symbolic backdrop. However, *Riot* does not attempt to offer a definitive political commentary or a unified explanation of events. Instead, it stages the mysterious death of an American volunteer as a narrative puzzle assembled through conflicting testimonies and archival materials. This structural fragmentation foregrounds the instability of historical truth, exposing how memory, ideology, and institutional discourse shape competing versions of reality.

The central problem this paper addresses is the epistemological uncertainty embedded within the novel's narrative design. How does fragmentation function as a strategy that unsettles claims to historical objectivity? And how does the dispersal of narrative authority resist nationalist closure by refusing to privilege a singular interpretive framework?

This study argues that *Riot* deploys postmodern narrative techniques to produce epistemic plurality, thereby challenging the coherence of communal and nationalist metanarratives. Through its decentered structure, the novel reimagines fiction as a critical space where history is negotiated rather than affirmed.

II. Theoretical Framework

This study situates *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor within an interdisciplinary theoretical matrix that includes historiographic metafiction, postmodern epistemology, discourse theory, dialogism, and memory studies. Together, these frameworks illuminate how the novel interrogates the production of historical truth and foregrounds epistemic plurality as a structural and political principle.

Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction provides the foundational lens for this reading. Hutcheon argues that postmodern fiction both installs and subverts historical discourse by exposing its textual and narrative constructedness (Hutcheon 105). Such texts do not deny the past; rather, they question the transparency of historical representation. In *Riot*, the archival collage of letters, diaries, official reports, and interviews simulates documentary authenticity while simultaneously destabilizing it. By foregrounding the mechanics of documentation, the novel blurs the boundary between fiction and historiography, revealing that both are mediated by narrative form.

Jean-François Lyotard's articulation of the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives" further clarifies the novel's epistemological stance (Lyotard xxiv). Grand narratives—nationalism, religious destiny, civilizational continuity—seek to impose coherence upon complex historical realities. *Riot*, however, resists such teleological closure. Its fragmented structure denies the consolidation of communal unrest into a singular explanatory framework, thereby enacting Lyotard's skepticism toward totalizing discourses. Truth, within the novel, emerges not as universal certainty but as perspectival negotiation.

Michel Foucault's theory of discourse and power adds another dimension to this analysis. For Foucault, knowledge is produced within discursive regimes that regulate what can be said and authorized (*The Archaeology of Knowledge* 49). In *Riot*, bureaucratic memoranda and police reports attempt to codify events within institutional language, projecting procedural objectivity. Yet these documents coexist with intimate letters and subjective testimonies, exposing how authority is embedded within structures of power. The novel thus dramatizes the Foucauldian insight that history is inseparable from the politics of representation.

Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and polyphony further illuminates the novel's narrative architecture. Bakhtin contends that the novel as a genre is inherently polyphonic, characterized by the coexistence of autonomous voices (Bakhtin 84). In *Riot*, no single perspective subsumes the others; rather, bureaucratic, ideological, personal, and transnational voices intersect without hierarchical resolution. This dialogic multiplicity produces epistemic plurality, reinforcing the novel's resistance to monologic authority.

Finally, theories of collective and cultural memory, as articulated by Maurice Halbwachs and Jan Assmann, provide insight into the communal tensions underlying the narrative. Halbwachs argues that memory is socially framed (Halbwachs 38), while Assmann emphasizes that cultural memory stabilizes group identity across generations (Assmann 112). The competing historical claims embedded within *Riot* reveal how memory functions as a site of ideological mobilization. By presenting these memories as fragmentary and contested, the novel challenges their transformation into singular historical truth.

Collectively, these theoretical perspectives demonstrate that *Riot* operates not merely as a narrative of communal unrest but as a sustained critique of historiographic authority. Through fragmentation, polyphony, and archival simulation, the novel foregrounds the constructedness of history and redefines fiction as a space of epistemological interrogation.

III. Fragmentation as Epistemological Strategy

In *Riot*, **Shashi Tharoor** employs fragmentation as a deliberate epistemological strategy that unsettles the authority of linear historical narration. The novel is structured as a compilation of letters, diary entries, bureaucratic memoranda, interview transcripts, and journalistic reports, all of which reconstruct the circumstances surrounding Priscilla Hart's death. This documentary assemblage simulates archival authenticity, yet it simultaneously foregrounds the instability of truth. As one official report tersely concludes, "The facts of the case remain inconclusive" (Tharoor 92). The bureaucratic language gestures toward objectivity, but its admission of inconclusiveness exposes the limits of institutional knowledge.

The fragmentation of narrative perspective intensifies this uncertainty. Priscilla's personal reflections, for instance, convey emotional intimacy and cultural curiosity: "India is not a country you can understand from the outside" (Tharoor 47). Her voice is juxtaposed with that of Lakshman, whose ideological convictions frame events through the lens of religious identity and historical grievance. Meanwhile, journalistic accounts introduce yet another interpretive layer, often reshaping events to suit narrative sensationalism. The result is a polyphonic structure in which no single voice assumes authoritative dominance.

This dispersal of narrative authority aligns with Linda Hutcheon's argument that historiographic metafiction "installs and then blurs the line between fiction and history" (Hutcheon 113). In *Riot*, the archival form appears to promise factual reconstruction; however, contradictions between documents undermine any stable conclusion. For example, differing testimonies regarding the timing and motivation of the riot expose how memory is shaped by positionality. Each narrator's account is mediated by personal investment, ideological affiliation, or institutional constraint. The reader is

therefore compelled to negotiate between competing narratives rather than passively receiving a coherent account.

The structural fragmentation also reflects Jean-François Lyotard's characterization of the postmodern condition as "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). Grand narratives of nationalism or communal destiny are never consolidated within the text. Instead, the absence of an omniscient narrator prevents the consolidation of events into a singular teleological framework. Even the romantic subplot between Priscilla and Lakshman fails to offer interpretive closure; their relationship is refracted through letters and retrospective commentary, never stabilized as definitive truth.

Moreover, the archival format foregrounds what Michel Foucault identifies as the discursive production of knowledge, wherein authority is embedded within institutional forms of documentation (Foucault 49). Police reports and administrative files seek to impose procedural order upon chaotic events, yet their formal rigidity contrasts sharply with the fluidity of personal memory. This tension reveals how historical narratives are shaped by systems of power rather than transparent facticity.

Thus, fragmentation in *Riot* functions not merely as postmodern experimentation but as epistemological critique. By staging history as a collage of partial, conflicting accounts, Tharoor dramatizes the impossibility of accessing an unmediated truth. The novel ultimately reconfigures fiction as a site where the politics of representation are exposed and where knowledge emerges as contingent, constructed, and perpetually open to revision.

IV. Epistemic Plurality and Narrative Decentering

The structural fragmentation of *Riot* by **Shashi Tharoor** culminates in what may be termed epistemic plurality—a condition in which truth is neither singular nor hierarchically organized but dispersed across competing discursive positions. The novel's refusal to privilege an authoritative narrator produces a decentered narrative field in which meaning must be negotiated rather than received. This dispersal of narrative authority aligns with Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of polyphony, wherein multiple voices coexist without being subordinated to a single ideological perspective (Bakhtin 84).

In *Riot*, each textual fragment offers a distinct interpretive framework. The bureaucratic voice seeks procedural clarity, reducing communal unrest to administrative terminology. One memorandum asserts that the disturbance was "the result of unfortunate but spontaneous public reaction" (Tharoor 118). Such phrasing attempts to neutralize ideological tensions through institutional language. Yet this official account is unsettled by personal testimonies that foreground emotional and political complexity. Lakshman's reflections, for example, reveal a deeply internalized historical grievance: "You cannot ask us to forget what has been denied to us for centuries" (Tharoor 134). His statement reframes the riot not as spontaneous chaos but as historically embedded resentment.

Similarly, Priscilla Hart's letters introduce a transnational gaze that complicates the narrative terrain. She observes, "Everyone here speaks of history as if it were a living wound" (Tharoor 52). Her perspective neither fully comprehends nor dismisses local tensions; instead, it exposes the layered nature of communal memory. The juxtaposition of these voices produces epistemic dissonance. No testimony conclusively resolves the circumstances of her death; instead, each adds another layer of interpretive ambiguity.

This narrative strategy resonates with Jean-François Lyotard's assertion that the postmodern condition is marked by "incredulity toward metanarratives" (Lyotard xxiv). In *Riot*, nationalist and religious metanarratives fail to consolidate events into coherent ideological meaning. The absence of narrative closure prevents the transformation of communal conflict into a teleological story of destiny or redemption. Rather, the text foregrounds the provisional nature of all explanatory frameworks.

Moreover, Michel Foucault's notion that knowledge is produced within discursive regimes illuminates the novel's interrogation of authority (Foucault 49). Institutional documents claim objectivity, yet their authority derives from their formal status rather than from epistemic transparency. By placing official reports alongside intimate diaries and journalistic speculation, Tharoor destabilizes the hierarchy of discourse. The reader is positioned as an active interpreter, tasked with navigating contradictions without the reassurance of final judgment.

Thus, epistemic plurality in *Riot* functions as both aesthetic principle and political critique. By decentering narrative authority and proliferating perspectives, the novel resists the homogenizing impulses of nationalist historiography. Truth becomes a dialogic process rather than a fixed conclusion, underscoring the novel's postmodern reconfiguration of history as contested, contingent, and irreducibly plural.

V. Communalism, Memory, and Nationalist Metanarratives

In *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor situates communal unrest within a broader contest over memory, identity, and historical meaning. Although the novel refrains from explicit political didacticism, the Ayodhya dispute functions as a powerful symbolic backdrop—a site where competing narratives of the past converge and collide. Ayodhya, in this context, is not merely a geographical location but a discursive space saturated with cultural memory and ideological investment. It embodies what Jan Assmann describes as “cultural memory,” a form of remembrance that stabilizes collective identity by reactivating selected pasts (Assmann 112). In *Riot*, however, such stabilization is persistently unsettled.

The novel foregrounds how religious identity is constructed through narrative. Characters invoke history not as an objective record but as a legitimizing discourse. Lakshman's assertion that certain grievances “cannot be erased by political convenience” (Tharoor 134) reveals how historical memory becomes a moral claim upon the present. These invocations of the past function as narrative acts that consolidate communal belonging. Maurice Halbwachs' argument that memory is socially framed (Halbwachs 38) becomes particularly relevant here: individual recollections are inseparable from collective structures that shape and authorize them. In *Riot*, religious identity emerges not as an essence but as a story repeatedly told, revised, and mobilized.

Yet the novel resists allowing these narratives to crystallize into teleological inevitability. Jean-François Lyotard's critique of metanarratives—those overarching stories that impose coherence and destiny upon history—illuminates this resistance (Lyotard xxiv). Nationalist discourse often seeks to transform communal conflict into a linear narrative of historical rectification or cultural revival. However, *Riot* refuses such closure. The fragmented documentary structure disperses authority across conflicting testimonies, ensuring that no single ideological framework achieves narrative supremacy. Even official accounts that attempt procedural neutrality fail to consolidate meaning conclusively (Tharoor 118). The riot remains interpretively unstable, resisting absorption into a singular nationalist myth.

This structural refusal constitutes a critique of homogenizing nationalist discourse. By juxtaposing bureaucratic language with personal letters, transnational observations, and ideologically charged statements, the novel exposes the artificial coherence often imposed by state or communal narratives. Michel Foucault's insight that discourse produces knowledge within regimes of power is particularly resonant here (Foucault 49). Official documentation claims objectivity, yet its authority derives from institutional sanction rather than epistemic transparency. Tharoor's narrative strategy disrupts this hierarchy by placing institutional and personal voices on the same textual plane.

Ultimately, *Riot* reveals that communalism operates not only through violence but through competing constructions of memory. By denying teleological resolution and sustaining epistemic plurality, the novel resists the reduction of complex historical tensions into homogenized nationalist myth. In doing

so, it reconfigures fiction as a critical arena where the politics of remembrance and identity are exposed, interrogated, and left deliberately unresolved.

VI. The Politics of Representation

In *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor extends his interrogation of history into the complex terrain of representation, foregrounding how perspective, positionality, and discursive authority shape cultural meaning. The novel's polyphonic structure does not merely recount communal unrest; it exposes how such unrest is mediated through competing interpretive frameworks. Central to this politics of representation is the presence of Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer whose letters introduce a transnational gaze into the narrative field. Her observations—at once empathetic and perplexed—underscore the difficulty of translating culturally embedded conflicts into universally comprehensible narratives. When she remarks that history in India feels “alive and unsettled” (Tharoor 52), she articulates both fascination and estrangement. Her perspective is not a neutral vantage point but a culturally inflected lens that reveals the interpretive filters through which difference is apprehended. By incorporating this Western gaze without privileging it, Tharoor complicates simplistic binaries between Western rationality and Indian subjectivity, exposing both as discursively constituted positions rather than stable epistemic categories.

Gender further complicates this representational matrix. Priscilla's testimony emerges through intimate correspondence and retrospective reconstruction, positioning her simultaneously as participant, observer, and symbolic figure within the communal crisis. Her voice contrasts sharply with the assertive rhetoric of male political actors whose narratives are structured around historical entitlement, religious grievance, and ideological certitude. This juxtaposition foregrounds the gendered dimensions of witnessing: while male voices often invoke collective destiny and civilizational memory, Priscilla's letters foreground affect, uncertainty, and personal vulnerability. The private register of her narrative resists the declarative finality of nationalist discourse, suggesting that lived experience destabilizes ideological absolutism. Representation thus becomes not only culturally mediated but also gender-inflected, revealing how authority is unevenly distributed across voices.

Equally significant is the tension between institutional documentation and intimate narrative. Police reports, administrative memoranda, and journalistic summaries attempt to codify the riot within procedural and bureaucratic language, projecting neutrality and administrative clarity (Tharoor 118). These documents embody what Michel Foucault identifies as the authority of discourse operating within institutional regimes of power (Foucault 49). Their claim to objectivity derives less from epistemic transparency than from structural legitimacy. Yet these official narratives coexist with diaries and personal letters that expose emotional complexity and ideological contradiction. By placing bureaucratic formalism alongside subjective testimony, Tharoor destabilizes conventional hierarchies of credibility.

Ultimately, *Riot* reveals that representation itself is an arena of ideological negotiation. No perspective remains unmediated; no account achieves absolute authority. The novel demonstrates that communal conflict is not only enacted through violence but also constructed through narrative framing. In exposing the discursive foundations of representation, Tharoor transforms fiction into a critical space where power, memory, gender, and cultural perception intersect. The politics of representation in *Riot* thus reinforces the novel's broader commitment to epistemic plurality, challenging readers to recognize how historical meaning is always shaped by the vantage points from which it is told.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor constitutes a significant intervention in contemporary Indian English fiction through its sustained interrogation of historical authority and nationalist narrative coherence. By structuring the novel as an assemblage of documentary fragments—letters, diary entries, bureaucratic memoranda, interviews, and journalistic reports—Tharoor transforms

narrative form into epistemological critique. The fragmented architecture of the text does not merely mirror communal disorder; it actively unsettles the epistemic foundations upon which claims to historical truth are constructed. In doing so, the novel exemplifies the principles of historiographic metafiction, foregrounding the textual mediation of history while resisting the illusion of transparent representation.

The analysis has shown that epistemic plurality operates as the novel's central narrative ethic. The dispersal of narrative authority across institutional, ideological, intimate, and transnational voices prevents the consolidation of events into a singular interpretive framework. No account achieves final legitimacy; instead, each perspective reveals its partiality and discursive conditioning. This structural decentering resonates with postmodern skepticism toward metanarratives, particularly those nationalist or religious frameworks that seek to impose teleological coherence upon complex communal tensions. By refusing closure, *Riot* denies readers the comfort of definitive explanation and compels them to engage critically with the instability of competing truth-claims.

Furthermore, the novel's engagement with memory underscores how communal identity is narratively produced rather than historically given. Religious and political affiliations are sustained through selective acts of remembrance, which transform the past into a legitimizing discourse for present action. Yet Tharoor persistently destabilizes such consolidations by juxtaposing official documentation with subjective testimony, exposing the operations of power embedded within archival forms. Institutional reports claim neutrality, but their authority derives from structural sanction rather than epistemic transparency. Through this juxtaposition, the novel dramatizes the Foucauldian insight that knowledge is inseparable from discourse and power.

Equally significant is the politics of representation embedded in the novel's transnational and gendered perspectives. The presence of a Western observer complicates cultural interpretation, while intimate narratives challenge the declarative certainty of ideological rhetoric. These narrative strategies collectively resist homogenizing impulses that reduce communal conflict to a singular civilizational narrative. Instead, *Riot* sustains a dialogic field in which competing memories and identities coexist without hierarchical resolution.

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