# Identitäten / Identities
## Interdisziplinäre Perspektiven

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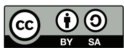
HGGS
HEIDELBERGER GRADUIERTENSCHULE FÜR GEISTES- UND SOZIALWISSENSCHAFTEN

UNIVERSITÄT HEIDELBERG
ZUKUNFT SEIT 1386

Bibliografische Information der Deutschen Bibliothek
Die Deutsche Bibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie. Detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet abrufbar über http://dnb.ddb.de.

© 2015 Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg
Plöck 107–109, 69117 Heidelberg
www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de

Satz und Gestaltung: Universitätsbibliothek Heidelberg / Cosima Stawenow
Umschlaggestaltung: Heidelberger Graduiertenschule für Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften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*Lisa Freigang*

# Identity and Violence

## Sectarian Conflict in Post-Independence Indian Literature

### 1. Introduction

India is the world's largest democracy and to many the epitome of diversity. More than twenty languages are spoken in the country, which is divided into twenty-eight states and home to many different religions. It is thus necessarily complicated to define a collective Indian identity inclusive of the plethora of linguistic, regional, caste, and ethnic identities. For many, however, diversity itself is the essence of India.

After Independence in 1947, secularism became the basis of the free Republic of India. When the British left, the Indian subcontinent was partitioned into the states of India and Pakistan along sectarian lines: Pakistan was created as a Muslim country in the northern and eastern Muslim majority parts. The partition was a traumatic event and led to violent conflicts between the different communities (particularly Muslims and Hindus), to mass migration, displacement, and the loss of several hundred thousand lives.[1] Attempting to come to terms with the violent upheavals that followed Independence, the founders of the free state stressed the idea of an Indian identity in the inclusionary sense: one that celebrates diversity and "reflect[s] an understanding of India's past as a joint construction in which members of different communities were involved."[2] In his famous speech "Tryst with Destiny," given at the moment of Independence in August 1947, the first Prime Minister of independent

1 Cf. Ian Talbot and Gurharpal Singh, The Partition of India (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 62.

2 Amartya Sen, The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity (London: Penguin, 2006), 348.

India, Jawaharlal Nehru, envisioned India as a "noble mansion [...] where all her children may dwell."[3]

## 2. Historical background

This integrative notion of a national identity has since been challenged on many occasions. The *Hindutva* ('Hinduness') movement gained momentum in the late 1980s and 1990s, promoting a narrow definition of Indian identity. As a Hindu nationalist movement, *Hindutva* brings together various organizations and parties. The goal of Hindu nationalists is the establishment of the Hindu nation: Hindu culture is seen as the defining element of the Indian nation and Muslims and other minorities are often considered foreigners who came to India as invaders.[4] Hindu nationalism was nothing new in the late 1980s. It was then, however, that a controversy around a mosque in the small north Indian town of Ayodhya became a forefront issue that entered politics on a national scale and put the Hindu nationalists' agenda back on the map.

The Babri Masjid in Ayodhya was built in the 16th century by Babur, the first Mughal emperor of India. The site at which the mosque was constructed by the imperial Muslim power was the supposed birthplace of Lord Rama, who is worshipped by millions of Hindus as the Supreme Being.[5] The Ayodhya dispute centres on the claim that a Hindu temple had been demolished by the Mughals to make room for their mosque.[6] While there is no evidence that Rama was a historical figure, "Hindu sentiment and myth widely held that he was and that he had been born in Ayodhya at the very spot where the mosque was later built."[7] To many Hindus, the Babri Mosque became the symbol of Muslim invasion and the Hindus' alleged humiliation, thus reviving tensions between the

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3 Jawaharlal Nehru, "Tryst with Destiny," in The Vintage Book of Indian Writing 1947–1997, ed. Salman Rushdie and Elizabeth West (London: Vintage, 1997), 2.

4 Cf. Stanley J. Tambiah, Leveling Crowds: Ethnonationalist Conflicts and Collective Violence in South Asia (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 244.

5 Cf. Peter van der Veer, "Riots and Rituals: The Construction of Violence and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism," in Riots and Pogroms, ed. Paul R. Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 160.

6 Cf. Christophe Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 1999), 91–92.

7 Ramachandra Guha, India After Gandhi: The History of the World's Largest Democracy (London: Macmillan, 2007), 582.

Hindu and Muslim communities that transformed the political scene in the 1990s.[8]

In 1989 the *Hindutva* organization VHP ('World Hindu Council') started a campaign to rebuild a Hindu temple at the spot where the mosque stood. The Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), the second largest political party in India, made the dispute a major campaign issue.[9] In the years that followed, tensions between Hindu supporters of the campaign to build a new temple and Muslims fighting to keep the mosque increased. Eventually, in 1992, the mosque was torn down and reduced to rubble by an angry mob. Around two thousand people were killed in ensuing riots not just in Ayodhya but in cities all over northern India.[10] Some of the largest riots occurred in Mumbai, known as India's most cosmopolitan city.[11]

Various levels of discourse come together in the Babri Mosque dispute: firstly the political (the dispute became a major issue in the general election), secondly the historical (historians tried to establish whether there really had been a temple which was demolished to make room for the mosque),[12] thirdly the social (the dispute raised general questions about India's pluralism) and, finally, the religious.

## 3. Literary responses to the Babri Mosque dispute

As the Indian novel in English is traditionally marked by a preoccupation with history and the nation – with what has been called "the idea of India"[13] – it is hardly surprising that the Babri Mosque dispute is dealt with extensively in contemporary Indian fiction in English. Literary critics have found that the "current state of society is perhaps the most persistent theme in modern Indian fiction,"[14] and the issues raised in the context

8 Cf. ibid., 634.
9 Cf. Peter van der Veer, "Riots and Rituals: The Construction of Violence and Public Space in Hindu Nationalism," in Riots and Pogroms, ed. Paul R. Brass (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 166–9.
10 Cf. Guha, India After Gandhi, 641.
11 Cf. ibid.
12 Cf. Jaffrelot, The Hindu Nationalist Movement and Indian Politics: 1925 to the 1990s, 91.
13 Cf. Sunil Khilnani, The Idea of India (New Delhi: Penguin, 1998).
14 R. K. Gupta, "Trends in Modern Indian Fiction," World Literature Today 68 (1994): 302.

of the Ayodhya conflict are mirrored in many works by Indian authors. These novels cannot easily be categorised – they are written by authors from different backgrounds, for different readerships and approach the issue from a variety of different angles, yet they are connected by the public discourse on communalism each of them reflects.[15] This paper will attempt to examine the literary response to the Ayodhya conflict in two Indian novels in English: Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*, published in 2001, and *The Moor's Last Sigh* by Salman Rushdie, published in 1995.

### 3.1 Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* is about the death of a young American woman, Priscilla Hart. She has come to India as a PhD student to conduct field research and to work for a local NGO dealing with population control. Her stay in the fictional north Indian town of Zalilgarh does not go as planned, however: she becomes involved with a married man, a government official named Lucky, and she is threatened by a Muslim man for educating his wife about birth control. As Priscilla's personal turmoil increases, the mood in the town changes. The novel is set in 1989, a year which Tharoor describes as "the key year when the agitation that was to culminate in the destruction of the mosque really began to gather steam in India."[16] In Zalilgarh, the effects of the Babri Mosque dispute on the relationship between the local Muslim and Hindu communities are starting to become palpable. As part of the campaign to rebuild a temple in Ayodhya, a local Hindu nationalist leader organizes a Hindu procession carrying consecrated bricks through the town. The procession turns into the riot that gives the novel its name. The next day, Priscilla is found dead, apparently killed by "a rioting mob."[17]

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15 Cf., for example, Sujit Saraf, The Peacock Throne (London: Sceptre, 2008); David Davidar, The Solitude of Emperors (London: Phoenix, 2007). The term 'communalism' in the South Asian context refers to "a condition of suspicion, fear and hostility between members of different religious communities. In academic investigations […] the term is applied to organized political movements based on the proclaimed interests of a religious community, usually in response to a real or imagined threat from another religious community" (Gyanendra Pandey, The Construction of Communalism in Colonial North India, 2nd ed. [New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006], 6).

16 Shashi Tharoor, interview by Joanne J. Myers, November 28, 2001, Carnegie Council for Ethics in International Affairs, accessed September 19, 2013, http://www.carnegiecouncil.org/studio/multimedia/20011128/index.html.

17 Shashi Tharoor, Riot (New York: Arcade Publishing, 2001), 1.

*Riot* is a novel of collisions: it is concerned with the East-West collision, as well as the collision between rural India and her English-educated elite.[18] The (literal) collision between Hindus and Muslims, however, is arguably at the centre of the novel. Priscilla's death leads to an investigation of the Hindu-Muslim relations in the town, as an American journalist as well as Priscilla's parents are trying to discover the circumstances of her death. They interview the different parties involved: the district magistrate Lucky, the Superintendent of Police, as well as the town's political leaders. The reader gets to know a Muslim historian's perspective on the Babri mosque dispute as well as that of a Hindu nationalist. The novel thus conveys the tensions and contradictions at play in a small town between different communities, separated by political and religious affiliations. *Riot* is not a narration but a collection of different sources: newspaper articles, diary entries, letters, interviews, cables, and poems. Beyond the reconstruction of the riot and the analysis of the specific reasons for the outbreak of violence, the different texts illuminate a discussion of Indianness that permeates the whole book.

Ram Charan Gupta, the procession's ringleader, is said to be "highly respected for his 'moderate' and 'reasonable' views."[19] However, his turns out to be the most fanatic of the voices represented in the novel. Gupta offers views connected to *Hindutva* ideology: he calls his Muslim neighbours "foreigners" and "evil people" who are "more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam, than to India."[20] Gupta's depiction of the Muslim community as the 'other' in Indian society is in sharp contrast to that of Lucky, the town's government official and part of the English-educated elite. He believes that India and Indianness is for everyone: "Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone else: that's the secret," Lucky states, "[e]nsure that democracy protects multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be a good Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian all at once."[21] To Lucky, the dream of a pluralist, peaceful India as envisioned by Nehru had become reality: "We have given passports to a dream, a dream of an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country. […] But who, in all of this, allowed for militant Hinduism to arise, challenging the very basis of Indianness?"[22] Lucky refers to the creation of a climate

18 Cf. Shashi Tharoor, interview by Joanne J. Myers.
19 Tharoor, Riot, 51.
20 Ibid., 54.
21 Ibid., 45.
22 Ibid.

in which sectarian identities are so narrowly defined that they become the dominant system of classification, overshadowing other identities as well as divisions between members of this allegedly unique identity.[23] The novel shows how "identity shifts that [follow] divisive politics" can thus foment violence between different communities who have previously lived together peacefully.[24]

The discussion of the Babri Mosque dispute in *Riot* illustrates two crucial concepts connected to the question of Indianness: those of the 'ownership' of history and truth. For Gupta, truth is arbitrary, not necessarily connected to history. Concerning the question of whether there had indeed been a Hindu temple at the site of the Muslim mosque and whether it was the birthplace of Rama, he says: "I have no doubt where the truth lies. What is more important […] is that millions of devout Hindus have no doubt either. […] Our faith is the only proof we need."[25] For Gupta, collective belief triumphs over historical facts. The birth of Rama, considered a myth by many, becomes collective memory, thus forming an important part of identity. Even Lucky admits: "They may be right, they may be wrong but what matters is what most people believe."[26] However, while Lucky is willing to accept people's beliefs, he does not want to convince others of truths they do not believe in. He suggests that the acceptance of different truths must be the starting point to appease the conflict.[27]

A Muslim history professor, in an interview with the American journalist writing about Priscilla's death, asks the question that is arguably crucial in the context of Hindu nationalism: "[W]ho owns India's history? […] This is what this whole […] agitation is about – about the reclaiming of history by those who feel that they were, at one point, written out of the script. But can they write a new history without doing violence to the old?"[28] Eliza Joseph, in her article on *Riot*, states that "an awareness of the past and its impact on human consciousness and identity could lend itself to a discourse that might accelerate the

23 Cf. Amartya Sen, Identity and Violence: The Illusion of Destiny (London: Penguin, 2006), 18–39.
24 Ibid., 9.
25 Tharoor, Riot, 121.
26 Ibid., 145.
27 Cf. Tharoor, Riot, 137 and 145–46.
28 Ibid., 110.

processes toward easing the communal impasse."[29] According to the history professor in *Riot*, if communalists cannot write a non-violent new history, then it is the historian's duty to "dig into the myths that divide and unite" the Indians and to appease communal hatred.[30] "What we need," he says, "are 'nonsectarian histories of sectarian strife.'"[31] This is what *Riot* wants to achieve: the novel can be seen as Tharoor's attempt to write that "nonsectarian history" of the Babri Mosque dispute. His narrative technique – a blend of different voices and sources – leaves it up to the readers to connect the pieces to a whole, to find their own truth. The novel does not suggest one answer or one truth, nor an easy solution. The reader is left with the realisation that in a pluralist society, truth is necessarily pluralistic. This is underlined by the fact that the novel not only fails to provide the reader with a clear answer concerning the historical truth about the Babri mosque and the riot, but also refuses to elucidate the circumstances of Priscilla's death. Instead, the reader is offered several explanations: she might not have been killed by a rioting mob after all, but rather by Lucky's jealous wife or by an angry husband holding her responsible for his wife's abortion.

As *Riot* is concerned with writing that "nonsectarian history of sectarian strife" it focuses on letting every concerned party speak. While Tharoor thereby manages to "lay bare the explosive substance from which communal conflicts are brewed,"[32] his protagonists remain stereotypes to a certain extent: the English-educated secularist, the religious fanatic, the balanced historian, the American looking uncomprehendingly on the issue. At times, the characters come across as mere mouthpieces for a certain viewpoint.

## 3.2 Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Salman Rushdie, in his fifth novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, takes a different approach: Moor, the novel's first person narrator and main protagonist, himself becomes part of a Hindu nationalist group. Whereas in *Riot* the protagonists seem to be 'types,' Moor himself is a conglomerate of types:

29 Eliza Joseph, "Contextualizing History for Communal Amity: Shashi Tharoor's Riot," in Postcolonial Readings in Indo-Anglian Literature, ed. K. V. Dominic (Delhi: Authorspress, 2009), 209.

30 Tharoor, Riot, 67.

31 Ibid., 64.

32 Joseph, "Contextualizing History," 210.

born ten years after Independence, he is the embodiment of the new nation, but also that of India's colonial history. With a Jewish father, a Christian mother, and his possible ancestors Boabdil, the last Sultan of Granada, as well as Portuguese explorer Vasco da Gama, Moor is representative of minorities as well as cultural diversity. In his own words, he is "both, and nothing: a jewholic-anonymous, a cathjew nut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur. [He] was – what's the word these days? – *atomised.* Yessir: a real Bombay mix."[33] As the embodiment of minority, pluralism, and hybridity, Moor mirrors Bombay, the city that Rushdie has called the "most cosmopolitan, most hybrid, most hotchpotch" and yet the most Indian of Indian cities.[34] One of Moor's main characteristics is his deformed right hand that looks like a club. It is described as the hand of a boxer, "one to knock the whole world flat with."[35]

In the fictional Bombay of the early 1990s, the underground is controlled by Ram Fielding, head of "Mumbai's Axis." Mumbai's Axis is a paramilitary group committed to the Hindu nationalist cause. After turning his back on his family, Moor grows close to Ram Fielding and becomes part of Mumbai's Axis. He joins the group as a cook, not necessarily because he believes in their cause. But in time he learns about their issues:

> It was […] at [Ram Fielding's] table that I first heard of the existence of a list of sacred sites at which the country's Muslim conquerors had deliberately built mosques on the birthplaces of various Hindu deities – and not only their birthplaces, but their country residences and love-nests, too, to say nothing of their favourite shops and preferred eateries. Where was a deity to go for an evening out? All the prime sites had been hogged by minarets and onion domes. It would not do! The gods had rights, too, and must be given back their ancient way of life.[36]

Describing the Babri mosque dispute – and similar disputes which cropped up at temples in other places – as being about the Hindu gods' status

33 Salman Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh, (1995; repr., London: Vintage, 2006), 104 (emphasis original).
34 Ibid., 350.
35 Ibid., 147.
36 Ibid., 299.

as minorities, their interests in real estate, or their favourite restaurants obviously makes the objective of the Ayodhya campaign appear absurd. Moor, however, understands what this talk about gods and birthplaces is all about – it is not about religion, but a political campaign: "Yes, indeed, a campaign for divine rights! What could be smarter, more *cutting edge*?"[37] The historical level of the dispute is dismissed altogether: "I blame fiction," one of his friends says, "[t]he followers of one fiction knock down another popular piece of make-believe, and bingo! It's war."[38]

Moor embraces his life as part of Mumbai's Axis as the group becomes a substitute family to him. He not only works as a cook, but becomes the boss's henchman. He uses his deformed right hand, his fist, to physically fight for the Axis's cause. Instead of questioning the morality of his actions – actions that will eventually contribute to the downfall of the city he loves – Moor feels that for the first time in his life he can be his true self. When he resolves to join Mumbai's Axis, it is in order to fully *become* his fate, to be, as he says, "a Hammer, not a Moor."[39] His deformed hand, formerly hidden and considered shameful, is now displayed openly and with pride. It becomes the source of Moor's "true self."[40] Thus Moor, who has suffered from his disability all his life, finally feels 'himself' when he gets to use his fist to beat up people standing in the way of the Axis's fundamentalist cause. In some sense, his joining Mumbai's Axis is reminiscent of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, in which the Duke of Gloucester, who suffers from physical deformities, states: "And therefore, since I cannot prove a lover . . . I am determined to prove a villain."[41] As Moor stands for a Muslim-Hindu-Catholic-Jewish compound, his deformed right hand can, to a certain extent, be read as symbolic of the potential for violence in this aggregation of cultural and religious difference. This is not to say, however, that pluralism is represented as inevitably connected with violence. Rather, the novel explores extremism and violence while giving insight into the ways it is connected to personal as well as collective identity. Moor disregards his affiliations and loyalties and attaches all importance to his belonging to Mumbai's Axis. In his case, it is his personal identity crisis that pushes him into the arms of an extremist

37 Ibid. (emphasis original).
38 Ibid., 351.
39 Ibid., 295.
40 Ibid.
41 William Shakespeare, The Tragedy of King Richard III (London: Blackie and Son, 1896), 1.1.28–30.

group. However, the portrayal of Moor's "singular identity affiliation" is mirrored in society, as sectarian activists incite individuals or groups to "ignore all affiliations and loyalties other than those emanating from one restrictive identity," thereby contributing to social tension.[42]

In *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as the Ayodhya campaign picks up steam and tensions between the communities grow, the changes the city of Bombay undergoes are conveyed through ekphrasis. Moor's mother Aurora is a celebrated artist, whose work used to celebrate motifs of hybridity and pluralism. Formerly, in her art, Aurora tried to give her son, "symbol … of the new nation," a chance at being whole.[43] The "fearsome fist" became a source of beauty and creativity in her paintings: "In the 'early Moors' my hand was transformed into a series of miracles; often my body, too, was miraculously changed."[44] Aurora's art drew a utopian picture: "[O] ne universe, one dimension, one country, one dream, bumpo'ing into one another, or being under, or on top of it."[45] However, in her later paintings, Moor ceases "to stand as a symbol […] of the new nation, being transformed, instead, into a semi-allegorical figure of decay."[46] Aurora's paintings offer a view of modern Indian society and therefore also "document the decline of India's idealistic pluralism."[47] In her later pieces, people are

> made of rubbish, […] collages composed of what the metropolis did not value: lost buttons, broken windscreen wipers, torn cloth, burned books, exposed camera film. They even went scavenging for their own limbs: discovering great heaps of severed body parts, they pounced on what they lacked, and they weren't too particular, couldn't afford to be choosers, so that many of them ended up with two left feet or gave up the search for buttocks and fixed a pair of plump amputated breasts where their missing behinds should be.[48]

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42 Sen, Identity and Violence, 21.
43 Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh, 303.
44 Ibid., 224.
45 Ibid., 226.
46 Ibid., 303.
47 Alexandra W. Schultheis, "Postcolonial Lack and Aesthetic Promise in The Moor's Last Sigh," Twentieth Century Literature 47, no. 4 (2001): 577.
48 Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh, 302.

As the atmosphere in Bombay changes and communal violence breaks out, Aurora's work turns to images of waste and monstrosity. The human collages in her work foreshadow the downfall of Bombay due to Muslim-Hindu violence, as "the heroine's art becomes increasingly representative of the embattled zone of India's identity, and history, just one of many 'petits récits' told from an openly subjective and minority point of view, instead of constituting an imposed epic or 'grand narrative' to which the reader is subjected."[49] After Hindu-Muslim riots in Bombay leave hundreds dead and wounded and bomb blasts shake the city, detached body parts are no longer visible only in Aurora's art: there are "bits of bodies lying everywhere; human and animal blood, guts and bones. Vultures so drunk on flesh that they sat lopsidedly on rooftops, waiting for appetite to return."[50] At the end, the city is no longer Moor's Bombay.

## 4. Conclusion

Whereas in *Riot* the reader is given first-hand accounts from representatives of different viewpoints, the strength of Rushdie's portrayal of Hindu nationalist extremism seems to lie in the fact that the protagonist, Moor, is himself an aggregation of different communities and viewpoints. Rushdie thereby makes apparent the contradictions that are shaking the very idea of Indianness. By participating in the violence that ends up destroying 'his' Bombay, the city he himself is identified with throughout the novel, Moor reduces the Hindu nationalist ideology to absurdity.

*Riot* as well as *The Moor's Last Sigh* represent the identity crisis that communalism has plunged India into. The (often ambivalent and contradictory) public discussion of violence is not only traceable in the novels, but the texts engage consciously in the public discourse on communal violence. The novels bring together different discourses that are commonly separated in the public arena, thereby contributing to the negotiation of collective identities between a narrowly defined national identity and the reality of India's pluralism.

49 Madelena Gonzalez, Fiction after the Fatwa: Salman Rushdie and the Charm of Catastrophe (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), 126.

50 Rushdie, The Moor's Last Sigh, 371.

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