

# Reveries of a Riot

By Veena Gokhale

The riot has been raging outside Mira's window for more than two days. The window is large and square. Lacy, white curtains frame it on the inside. A second set of curtains, in rough-textured *khadi*, patterned with maroon and yellow stripes, protect the lace from the searing heat of the sun. They keep out the glare on reclining Sunday afternoons, when Mira reads, dozes, embroiders or listens to Hindustani classical music as the lazy softness of a stretching cat steals over her.

The window has remained shut now for two days. So has their front door. They haven't stirred out while the curfew flickers on and off outside, like a light bulb gone crazy. Mira is nearly out of fresh milk and running low on vegetables.

During this time of enforced rest, Mira returns to the window again and again. She sits at some distance from it, curled up on the overstuffed sofa, or straight up in the old, rocking chair. Or down on the carpet, knees drawn to her chin, to contemplate the window. The window has become not something to look out of, but something to look at.

On the first day of the riot Mira, and her husband Mihir, were getting ready to go to work, when they heard shouts, the sound of running feet, breaking glass and then a gunshot. They rushed to the window, Mihir putting out a restraining hand to prevent Mira from sticking her head too far out.

All they saw at first were three men running away. And broken glass on the pavement opposite their apartment building. Either the tailoring shop or the bakery, or both, must have been vandalised.

Mira felt Mihir draw in his breath sharply. It was then that she saw the body, sprawled face-down on the pavement, at the edge of the street.

Mira's first commonplace thought was: this is like the movies. She expected to see a thin trickle of blood run out from under the man's feet into the open drain, turning the brown sewage water to a darker hue.

But there was no blood that day, or the next, just distant shouts and screams.

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The next morning, the contents of the tailoring shop and the bakery - shelves and counters, trays and sewing machines, chairs and curtains, knick knacks - had been dented or broken, and thrown on the pavement. Some of the things had spilled onto the street.

The attack must have occurred at dawn, or very early in the morning, before they had woken up and taken positions beside the window. They had missed the action.

They had heard more than they had seen, their view confined to the narrow strip of road, pavement and housefronts framed by their window, while their ears extended like antenna, picking up distorted air waves from all around.

On the first day, they had felt compelled to spend long hours at the window, to monitor the riot on the radio and the television (which weren't giving much away). And the telephone. It was a day punctuated by quick visits from the neighbours - speculative conversations, forced little jokes, lamentations on the state of the government, politics, the country and the world, hastily exchanged reassurances.

They had said, over and over, among themselves, that things could not go on like this. Tempers had to cool. People would come back to their senses.

*The anger and hate would be snuffed out by death, the smell of death filling the streets and the houses, spreading over the city like an oil spill contaminating the sea. The anger and hate would be diluted by the wailing of frightened children, the ritualised mourning of widows, the public grief of relatives - loud, harsh, unrelenting.*

There was the police force, and the army. The army would know how to handle a situation like this, even if the police failed. Community groups too would play a role, surely, going door to door, counselling, consoling, pleading, haranguing.

Peace would come. It might take some time, but it would descend, eventually, like a soothing late-monsoon shower, gentle and fragrant.

Meanwhile it was best to stay indoors. Stay calm. In control. Do the ordinary, every day things - cooking, eating, sleeping - that would blanket the insanity which had taken over the streets. And keep thoughts from scattering in unseemly directions.

On that near-normal, first day of the riot, Mira walked around their spacious living room, over furnished at the edges, examining the many things - inherited, gifted, bought, picked up, and others that seemed to have turned up on their own - with a solemn interest.

She spent quite a while at the bookshelves, specially the one that held all the old, mouldy books that smelt so good. Here were the world classics, Wuthering Heights nestling next to War and Peace. The Trial cheek-and-jowl with Old Man and the Sea. Books by Agatha Christie and PG Wodehouse.

And the books on Hindu spirituality - the *Upanishads*, the *Bhagavad Geeta*, the writings of Ramkrishna Paramhans, Vivekanand, Shri Aurobindo and the Mother. These books had belonged to Mira's father-in-law, whom she had never met. He had passed away when Mihir was just 10 years old.

A newer and smaller bookshelf was devoted to Graham Greene, Gabriel Garcia Marquez, Italo Calvino, Toni Morrison, Salman Rushdie, Bapsi Sidhwa, Amitav Ghosh, and others.

The two remaining bookshelves could have been labelled 'his' and 'hers.' One held Mihir's books on engineering, management and cricket, plus a smattering of poetry, in English and Gujarati.

Mira's bookshelf contained scholarly volumes on sociology. She had started the collection when she had embarked on her Master of Social Work degree at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, and had meticulously added to it through the 6 subsequent years of her professional life in academia.

Here you could also find cookery books - the regional cuisine from the many Indian states - and pattern books on embroidery, craft books, books on feminism, and old magazines - *Eve's Weekly*, in its more radical avatar, *Manushi*, *Filmfare*, and the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Half a dozen Hindi novels and a few volumes of *Abhilasha*, a Hindi literary quarterly.

There was so much that they had brought with them when they had got married and so much more they had acquired through the five years of their marriage - coffee tables, and coffee table books, wooden screens, flower vases, painted pottery, terracotta ashtrays, handicrafts, clocks, sketches and posters, photographs, records and cassettes, letters...

Mira had enjoyed yelling through the bedroom door at Mihir: do-you-remember-such-and-such-thing-event-person? Mihir had come into the drawing room for a while, and they had laughingly recalled the histories and biographies of the various objects, till Mihir, tiring of the game, had retired to the bedroom with the latest issue of 'Business India,' and Mira had fallen once again into a silent contemplation of the window.

On the second day of the riot, there were no visits from the neighbours, or phone calls from friends, as though the event had gone from being a collective tragedy to a personal failure which had to be dealt with in harrowing aloneness, sealed indoors, exiled into the self.

On the second day, Mihir stayed in the bedroom, Mira in the living room. The violent fight they had had the night before drove them to carve out their separate spheres and stay within their isolated, but still-connected spaces.

There hadn't been very much else to do but look at the window. It's perfect symmetry. The white encasement, slightly scratched and chipped in places. The curtains half drawn back. The play of light against delicate lace. The panes, dusty but secure. Whole, when there were so many shattered windows on their street, in their city. So much glittering, crunchy glass everywhere.

Whole. What a wonderful word. Treacherous though. Watch out for that one. Take away the 'w' and a gaping wound opens. An external wound you think at first. Superficial. Easily healed. But a second look reveals that the knife has cut through the layers of skin to reach the vital organs, now a bloody, implacable mess, threatening to break through to the surface to reveal the hopelessness of the affliction.

What a wonderful, whole window. Watching it was both delight and torment. Wanting it to stay intact. Wanting it to shatter. Who were the lucky ones? Who had got it right? Those whose windows had been broken? Or those who had found refuge behind their unblemished windows?

It was on the eve of Holi, the night when Holika, the demoness - Pralhad's tormentor - is consigned to the flames, that Mira had been entranced by a bonfire, once, a long time ago.

The colony boys had built a huge bonfire in the field, in front of Mira's house. Mira had watched them building it all evening, knowing that something significant was to come, but without a clue to what it might be.

The bonfire had been set alight after it got dark, by the light of lanterns, exciting, shadowy things in themselves. A roaring fire took birth with everyone milling around it, singing, dancing and eating sweets.

Mira did not join the festivities. She sat on the grass - a chubby girl with glasses - watching the flames rise and lick the sky, turning her world into a blaze, while the piercing heat turned her insides rosy warm and liquid. Later, her mother had half dragged, half carried her home.

Still Mira watched the flames from her bedroom window, her mind blank, the fire consuming her from inside out, making her whole.

She had fallen asleep at her vigil, by the window and woken up early as the first light of the day had crept into her eyes, through shuttered eyelids.

As soon as her eyes opened Mira looked out of the window expecting to see the fire, which was gone. Mira's heart started to beat hard. She rushed out of the house in her rubber slippers and pajamas, knowing her mother would scold her if she found out, and ran, panting, half-falling, feeling a little sick, to the spot where the bonfire had been.

A perfect circle of ash, charred twigs and burnt grass stood in the field. As Mira walked into it, the acrid, ashy smell, filled her to choking and crumbling ashes, powdery soft and still warm, tickled the edges of her feet.

Looking up, Mira saw the arching blue sky go from pink to gold. It was immense, whole, like the fire had been. Bending down she grabbed fistfuls of ash. She had preserved that ash in a toffee tin for many years after that.

The fascination with the window was less innocent. But there was no option: the entrancement had to run its course.

*Blood. It would have been nice to have seen some. Snarling red, viscous. Bubbling as if in anger. Simmering as if full of spite. What use a riot or a fight without the redness, the richness of real blood?*

It would have been good to see a stone, stones, strike the window panes. Enter the living room and fall with a reverberating thud that shook the somnolent apartment.

It would have been good to see the glass crack, the pane turn into an intricate spiders web. While the other shattered and fell to the floor, tinkling.

Shards of glass everywhere. Glass, pure and beautiful. What use a riot or a fight without broken glass, without the hardness, sharpness, the clarity, of glass?

But there had been no blood.

There had never, it seemed, been any *real* blood in Mira's life, unless one counted tame, menstrual blood, stale and sour-smelling, as real blood. More real to her than her own blood was the tomato-ketchup blood of the countless Hindi movies that Mira had grown up on.

At first the blood spilled on screen appeared to have a good reason to be there. It was spilled in the name of righteousness, honour, justice, love, filial devotion. But as the years rolled on, the bloodbaths got more and more senseless, random and gory. The films were holding up mirrors to the reality around them.

Mira and her friends started seeing these movies less and less as time passed. Because they seemed to have nothing to do with *their ideas, their motivations, their lives*. The movies had created their own universe and occupied an orbit that did not overlap with the space that defined Mira's life.

But as the first day of the riot had started to fade into night, Mira had felt her blood coursing through her veins once again, after a long time indeed. She had experienced it as a warm, lively thing, intent on action.

She couldn't figure out what had triggered off this unfreezing of her blood, and her spirit, which had brought on the desperate urge to let her innards spill out through her mouth, her sole weapon.

Words had spewed out of Mira with a damning ferocity that night, when everything had seemed under control, in the beginning. All that time she had believed that the violence outside was an external event, unreal and transient. It had nothing to do with *her, with Mihir - their ideas, their motivations, their lives.*

They would move, Mihir had said. They had been searching for a flat now for over 6 months. They had been too picky. That's why they hadn't found anything. They had to be realistic. They had to compromise. They would settle for a half-way decent place in a nice locality. They would leave here as soon as they could.

"And what about us? Do you think that we will solve any of that by moving?"

"Don't start on that now, Mira. Not tonight of all nights. Please."

Flames licked at the corners of Mira's mind.

Flames and fire, so central to Indian life, and death. The ancient fascination that endures. Sacred fire, ultimate purifier, made profane by sati and bride burning. The rites and wrongs of fire still endure.

The body is consumed by fire to be made whole. Fire unlocks the spirit which merges with the whole. Fire is not so much death, as it is purification and after-life. So self immolation still endures - suicide and self expression, an end and a new beginning, rolled eerily into one.

The rioters had overturned three buses and set them ablaze, on the main road not far from where Mira lived. That must have been some bonfire!

Flames licked at the corners of Mira's mind, and she blazed with words.

Afterwards, after her eruption into angry utterances and Mihir's wordy counter attack, Mira felt empty and slack, de-muscled, limpid.

It was as if a great wind had blown through their flat, whirled all the objects around, shaken them up and set them back in their place, cleansed.

She felt she did not need to talk to Mihir ever again. This had been her first real conversation with him. And it had explained their life together with the geometric precision of the circle of ash left behind by the Great Bonfire.

As a child Mira had seen practically no anger or violence in her home. Her parents seemed always calm, though her father seemed a little sad at times and her mother would get somewhat testy. There appeared to be no quarrels or disagreements between them. They had chosen consciously to turn away from overt expression.

Things did not change very much in her adult life, which seemed, more or less like a seamless continuation of her tranquil childhood.

Before Mira and Mihir had found this flat, they had lived for a couple of months in a friends' apartment, where they had had to suffer a violent neighbour.

Shouts and screams, the sounds of banging doors and falling things, whimpers and sobs, emanated at odd hours from the neighbouring apartment. Perhaps they hadn't been all that loud, but in the hushed silence of her temporary home, which had echoed the hollow quiet of her parents house, the sounds had the impact of gunshots fired at a distance. Mira remembered thinking that some day, perhaps, the bullets would pierce the walls of her own home.

Standing at their window Mira would see the man storm out of the apartment building after a virulent sounding quarrel, get into the car and drive away noisily, leaving behind a swirl of dust. Sometimes, though less often, the woman would walk out of the house, a little unsteady, her *pallu* wrapped tightly around her head, dragging a sobbing child with her, to hail a rickshaw as it rounded a corner and disappear in a cloud of dust.

Through all this Mihir assured Mira, again and again, that they would move soon. They were spending all their after-work hours looking for a house; they were bound to find something. He appeared to get used to the situation but Mira couldn't stop herself from listening and looking out for their neighbours all the time.

She started leading a double life, lurking, in her mind, through the rooms of her neighbours house, a ghost haunted by an intense and unnatural curiosity, even as she sat down to dinner with Mihir, or brought out her embroidery books in the drawing room or watched Mihir wrestle with the Rubik's cube.

That was the feeling she experienced once again, as the riot raged outside their window. As she sat in her cosy, little home, leafing through glossy magazines, she was a ghost slipping through the restless streets.

*Now she was part of the crowd that jeered and cheered, hurled stones and abuse and set things alight. (What delight in seeing the flames rise high and lick the sky!) The crowd that had become a single moving, tensing, preying beast, intent on action...*

*Now she was in a dingy, way-side tea stall, listening to the rabble-rouser at the upturned table, his speech and spittle darting back and forth between him and his audience, people listening, forgetting their companions, the tea turning tepid in their cups, Someone whistled. Someone clapped. "Kya hero aadmi hai." (What a heroic man.)*

*Then she was moving down a street where everything was burning, the houses, the shops, the cars, the people, and she was dodging falling rafters and flying sparks, walking around the blazing bodies rolling on the ground, trying to quell the flames, hanging to life in the throes of death, she was shrinking*

*from burning limbs that were thrust at her from writhing heaps. And everywhere the stench of burning flesh...*

*She was on a street now where there were no people and no fires, only glass, everywhere, crushed glass covering the sidewalk and road and the walls of buildings, the whole world so crystalline and beautiful, blinding her with its brilliance...*

*Then she was on her own street which had been all cleaned up. There were people going about their business, unsmiling, silent.*

*Mira walked along quickly and uneasily down the street and towards her house, knowing that if someone made one small, false move the facade of normalcy would crumble and there would be glass on the street and the sound of running feet and shouts and gunshots.*

*They all had to be very, very careful. She knew that with an absolute certainty that made her break out in sweat. What if it was she who did something wrong?*

*She felt a scream forming at the base of her throat and rising slowly, and then she was at the entrance of her building, her self control deserting her as soon as she was inside the door, making her run up the hollow-sounding, wooden stairs, till she collided into a man who was going down the stairs.*

*As she brushed against him Mira got a whiff of his sweat mingled with that other body smell, unmistakable despite her fear and the total darkness that enveloped the staircase. This man was her first lover, who had been at one time as big as the bonfire, in Mira's life, blotting out everything else.*

*He seemed to recognise her and paused, though he had been in a great hurry a second ago. For a moment they withdrew into themselves, preparing for the encounter. Then they embraced.*

*Tongues of fire licked at Mira's skin. Her body felt translucent, cool, like fine glass.*

*He kissed her roughly on her mouth. He had a week-old beard that scratched her face. He hadn't had the time to shave or hadn't bothered to. He seemed agitated, his body too-warm, trembly. Mira clung closer to him and pushed her tongue into his feverish mouth.*

*He had been there, out on the streets, rioting. His clothes and skin were street-stained. Nothing else could explain his disturbed state.*

*Perhaps, at first, he had just been a passer-by, on a mindless errand, walking hurriedly down a street. Perhaps he had left his quiet side-street and walked onto a main street, into the eye of an inferno, surrounded suddenly by a throng of angry, shouting, crazed people throwing stones and hitting out at whatever they could find. Being of an excitable nature, the impressionistic young man that he was, perhaps he had been drawn in by the crowd, a participant rather than spectator in the random violence that created its purpose as it went along.*

*As Mira slipped her hand into his she felt the grainy texture of mud on them.*



*The images of the streets outside coalesced into a single flame and burned in Mira's mind. She felt as if he shared the flame. That, in fact, he was fuelling and brightening it as his body heat seeped into her. As they kissed, breathing chaotically, Mira pushed hard against him, wanting the street-sweat, mud-violence; the feverish hunger-anger of his tongue to infuse her being as well.*

*He led Mira by hand to the top of the building, to the little recess, musty, cobwebbed, stacked with discarded junk, that led to the terrace, which was locked.*

*Half undressing, they clung, clawed, bit, thrust, tugged, stroked each other, in a frenzy of love and despair. As he took her standing up, Mira felt his calloused hands (what had he been doing with his butter-smooth hands, soft and gentle in her memory?) grasp her hair, gather it in his fist, and pull her head back, hard. Pain, black and deep, washed over her as she came and came.*

*Now she was no longer apart, but a part of the riot, and would always be, with a part of the riot inside her forever.*

*He left her outside her flat. A brush of lips against her earlobe, a hand momentarily tightening around hers and he faded away. She couldn't smell him any longer. Though she could feel him still. Mira stood in the dark for a while, running her fingers over her swollen lips. Then she let herself into the apartment.*

They had picked the body off the pavement that very day, the first day of the riot. Late in the afternoon an ambulance had driven up, a siren rending the air. Two policemen had got out of the van and hauled the corpse into the car. There was no blood on the man's clothes. It was not anyone they could recognise, no one they had seen before in the neighbourhood.

There were no marks on the pavement. At least nothing they could see at that distance.

Mira could picture the body lying on the cold bunk inside the ambulance, which must smell depressingly of disinfectant. Perhaps they would cover him with a sheet.

What a strange corpse!

Dead bodies were covered from neck to toe in a white sheet, bedecked in garlands of flowers, their exposed faces set in repose. They lay on *charpoy*s held aloft by 4-5 men, who dressed in white, freshly bathed, carried the corpses down the street followed by a procession of white-clad mourners chanting "*Ram naam satya hai.*"

The man had been felled by a single bullet. They had heard just one shot. Who knows who the bullet had been meant for? Who knows how many sightless, meandering bullets had been forced to find a kill -someone who happened to be at a window, someone going about on a mundane errand, someone who had tried to duck into a doorway, some idiot with his back to the wall.

It's getting dark outside so Mira goes into the kitchen to cook some *dal-chawaal*. She decides to use the two remaining onions for the *dal*. Pulling out the knife, she goes chop-chop-chop with it. The blade slices rhythmically through the skin to reach the heart and goes on to the other side. Soon there is a heap of finely chopped onion on the board.

Tears run down Mira's face. She wipes them inadequately with a dishcloth.

“*Allah ho Akbar*,” Mira watches Mihir through the kitchen door as he starts up on hearing the familiar prayer call. They haven't heard it for two days. Mihir's eyes meet Mira's and turn hastily away.

There's a knock on the door. The neighbours start dropping in, in quick succession. There has been no curfew today, the third day of the riot. And if the mosque has been opened again, than everything must be all right.

I can go to work tomorrow, thank god, says one neighbour, I have to finish this important report for these clients who're coming in next week. They're Japanese, you know.

Mira brews cups of tea and hands them out through the kitchen door to Mihir, leaving him to deal with the visitors. She hates him for expressing different views to different neighbours, depending on their religion.

Tomorrow she would walk down the street, going around the area where the dead man had lain, superstitious and queasy about stepping into that space, but unable to shake off a horrible curiosity that would lead her to closely examine the ground as she went by.

The bakery and the tailorshop would be repaired. The week after she would go into the bakery to buy savoury *naan* bread to go with the *kheema-muttar* that she makes so well.

Later, she would go into the tailor shop with her magenta-silk blouse piece, to have a blouse stitched in the latest style, where the tailor's wife, her *burqua* thrown back over her broad, impassive face, would hand her dog-eared pattern books from under the counter.

Wearing the new blouse, her gorgeous, new *Kanjivaram* sari rippling and crackling around her, she would go, a week later, to her cousin's wedding, where they would not discuss the riot. The talk would centre around the decorations, the excess or simplicity of the jewellery on the women guests, the groom's income, the bride's beauty and the quality of the ice-cream served at the reception.

How would she conduct herself with the baker and the tailor, her neighbours, after all, if only by chance? Would she smile effusively at them, while they, addressing her as *'behenji'*, ask after Mihir *miya's* health?

Or would their transactions be concluded in an aura of bewildering guilt and shame, with an absence of eye-contact and a minimum of conversation?

Suddenly Mira decides that she has to get out of the apartment, go for a walk. Opening her closet, she finds a *duppatta* and drapes it around her head. She takes off her *bindi* and sticks it on the mirror of the dressing table.

Telling Mihir that she is going out for a while, she sweeps past him and out of the door before he has time to react.

Mira goes unhurriedly down the stairs and into the semi-deserted streets. They are somewhat cleaner than she had expected, though there is more than the usual load of garbage piled up at street corners. The streets are surprisingly devoid of policemen. Here and there are burnt out shells of things that were formerly whole.

Almost all the shops are closed, and there's a plethora of them - small, individualistic shops selling fabric, clothes, shoes, toys, school goods, *attar* (perfume) and incense, jewellery, buttons and lace, kitchenware, hardware, food, dairy products. There are shops that repair watches, leather goods, bicycles. A couple of the groceries have their doors half open.

The neighbourhood is old, the majority of the buildings dilapidated, badly in need of a coat of paint. They contrast sharply with the occasional, smart, new apartment building which is architecturally stark and angular. The older buildings have graceful, curved balconies, with wrought-iron railings and their windows and doors, composed of softly rotting wood, are framed by patterned arches, the designs either floral or geometric or a combination, looking as if they have half melted into the ancient facades.

Mira gets off the bigger and wider road and goes down a familiar *galli*, twisted and aromatic, past children playing hopscotch and skipping rope. A little girl in heavy pigtails catches her eye and smiles shyly.

She pauses as she finds herself approaching the mosque. The door to the mosque is ajar. Prayers spill out of the courtyard, into the dusky air. The minarets are outlined as inspiring silhouettes against the clear, blue sky.

Mira goes up to the door and peeps in. Inside there are a dozen odd men in white *kurta-pajamas*, and knitted skull caps, kneeling, bent over so that their heads almost touch the floor, praying. They are all grouped at the far corner of the courtyard.

The openness of the courtyard comes as a shock, almost, after the circumscribed space of the apartment. Mira feels exhilarated looking at the courtyard. As she watches, the space seems to hum, extend outwards and upwards.

In the centre of the courtyard is a group of pigeons hopping and fluttering on the floor. The soft, grey bodies cut a pleasing pattern against the beautiful, marble floor.

The pigeons take off and within seconds they are afloat, high in the sky, flying in formation. Mira watches them till they disappear, mingling smokily in the blue-grey sky.

Suddenly she is melancholy. How limiting it was to be outside the mosque. Excluded also from the flight of the pigeons. With only the option of a linear escape - the shutting of windows and the slamming of doors?

Mira slowly makes her way back home.

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#### Notes for the non-Indian reader:

\*"The man's a hero." - a derisive remark in Hindi.

The story is set in Bombay, India, in a predominantly Muslim locality. Mira and Mihir are Hindu names. The *naan* bread referred to here is made and sold predominantly by Muslims in the bakeries they own. Traditionally, tailoring has been taken up as an occupation by a section of the Indian Muslim community.

*Kheema* (minced meat), is a common food item for Indian Muslims. *Miya* means husband, in Urdu.

The *bindi* (conventionally the red dot on the forehead of married women, now as much a mark of fashion as custom, which comes in a sticker form as well) is worn traditionally by Hindu, not Muslim Indian women. Traditionally, a Muslim woman, if she were not wearing a *burqua* or veil, would drape a *duppatta* around her head, that is, cover her head as a mark of modesty.

*Raam naam satya hai*: (literally) the name of God is the truth - Hindi

*attar*: perfume

*galli*: a narrow alley

The story of Prahlad and Holika is a Hindu legend. You could read it by entering those two names in Google.