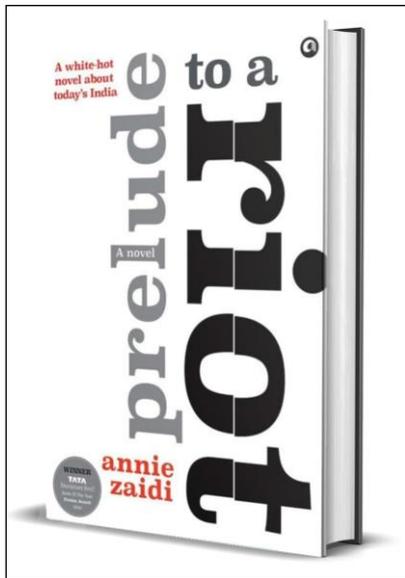


BOOK REVIEW



**PRELUDE TO A RIOT: A NOVEL** By ANNIE ZAIDI

Wasim Akram<sup>1</sup>✉



**BookDetails**

- **Title:** *Prelude to a Riot: A Novel*
- **Author:** Annie Zaidi
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The novel, *Prelude to a Riot* by Annie Zaidi, is a perfect reflection of today's India where tension between communities is brewing because of the growing divisive politics. The author, through her unique style of narration brings to the fore various issues that have shaken the social fabric of contemporary India causing an atmosphere of fear and anxiety amongst different sections of people including the minorities, the migrant workers, the tribals and the women. Set in an unnamed south Indian town, the novel revolves around two families of wealthy state owners; one Muslim and another Hindu, and shows that how because of growing divisive politics things have turned scarily problematic for the Muslim family. The author, by allowing each character a space to speak their mind in the form of soliloquies brings to the fore the varied forms of nuances and problems existing in today's India and hints at an impending violence.

Living in an age of political divide when communal mobilization is in full swing the novel captures the tensions between communities where organization like "Self-Respect Forum" acts as a proficient artisan of terror and violence. The whole purpose of this organization is to divide the people and destroy the delicate balance of peace and harmony that has existed for hundreds of years between communities. This force of religious division has turned Appa, the patriarch of the Hindu estate and his son, Vinny into fanatics who can't think beyond this religious lines and act to perpetrate fear and anxiety amongst the Muslims. This communal tension causes anxiety amongst people like Abu, his grandfather, Fareeda, Garuda and many others. Abu, an Mphil student can feel the coming of an impending violence and constantly expresses his concern over these growing tensions between communities. In this troubled time, he has lost all his enthusiasm for farming and the estate that he would inherit and constantly urges his grandfather and others to leave before it finally comes. For he, with his sagacity can imagine the coming of a bleak future which is not far away. He says: "It may seem like it is light years away, but this sort of thing, it travels at the speed of light. It will be here one night, at our

gates”(178).But his grandfather is the man of the soil who shares a strong emotional attachment with the land he inhabits and thus, even after knowing all this, decides to remain in ignorance.

This constant threat from fellow citizens is reason enough for the destruction of a civilization. Zaidi through the character of Garuda, the History teacher whose classes are always interspersed with contemporary politics reminds us of this threat while he says:“The fabric of the nation is made up of trillions of billions of millions of molecules. With strong forces pulling in opposite directions, the fabric rips.... No big colonial sword needs to come down to slash the fabric of the nation. Muscle by muscle, atom by atom, we are being torn from within. We are our own bomb” (165-166).These words by Garuda defines the problem that is prevailing in today’s India where citizens of this country are treated as alien in their own land by fellow citizens. Amidst all these chaos and turmoil Abu’s Grandfather still hopes for a better future where people would think like him: “Who could I hurt without damning my soul? Who in this world is not my own?” (180).

Communal tensions get escalated when rumors were spread about the Muslim migrant workers that they have come from across the border and people like Appa and Vinny tagged them as “illegal”. Though they are benefitted by exploiting these poor migrant workers and sometimes marvel at their tenacity for survival,they always look down upon them and never hesitate to call them illegal. The comments that Appa made about them are very derogatory and mixed with extreme religious bigotry. He says: “They can do everything. Road work, construction, rice fields, plantation work. Bomb work. They pick it up fast” (81).The attitude towards them that Appa holds is quite familiar in today’s India where anything bad can be attached to them without any hesitation and consideration.

The novel is a vehement critique of the system of entitlement which allows few families to hold lands at the expense of others. Zaidi through the character of

Garuda raises questions about the validity of the system. This system of entitlement mostly comes from caste-system as Garuda says while teaching: "White elites are thrown out of the country, yet everyone is still sitting in their assigned caste places. Some of you, you have hundreds of acres of land. Your ancestors were rewarded with land. Pampered by generations of kings, brown as well as white" (5). He further says: "You think you inherited your land because of your talents? How many of you would pass a farming test?" (5).

In this tumultuous situation of unrest and chaos the voice of Devaki emerges as a ray of hope who with her irrefutable logic and sensibility contradict with her husband and father and also raises questions about the role and status of women in a patriarchal social set up. In this era of fake news and hate mongering the voice of the editor of the local newspaper is another ray of hope who stood tall amidst all the opposition from Self-Respect Forum regarding the publication of a poem which they think has a mischievous intent to denigrate the goddess. Garuda serves as a mouth piece of Zaidi throughout the novel. He frequently questions the artisans of violence who always want to divide the society.

Zaidi's novel, *Prelude to a Riot* bears testimony to the troubled time we are living in. The novel has only few characters but each one of them contributes in the development of the plot and through their presentation, the author offers us a fearless account of the problems that are prevailing in today's India and expresses her concern over the explosion of an impending riot hovering around the corner. Written with utmost sincerity and care, the book is a must read to understand the anxiety and fear that the minorities, the tribals and many other marginalized sections of people are going through in today's India.