

Socio-Cultural Issues and Subjugation of Women in Shashi

Tharoor's Riot

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to study socio-cultural issues and subjugation of women in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot – A Novel*. The novel *Riot (2001)* traces the events of cultural activism and religious confrontation in the Indian scenario. It is a study of the East-West cultural clash against the backdrop of the communal disturbances. Tharoor is a distinguished figure in the history of Indian writing in English as his novels develop certain strategies in order to address directly some of the central concerns and burning problems of contemporary India. He depicts socio-cultural issues and women subjugation in *Riot*. He cleverly presents social evils in the society such as extra-marital affairs, dowry deaths, exploitation of women, violence in home and outside, repeated child births, superstition, subordination as well as marginalization of women along with the East-West cultural clashes. Subjugation of women in every social evil and customary calamity has been contemplated in the paper. On the basis of Tharoor's *Riot – A*

Novel, a sincere attempt is made to show the author as a social reformer who deftly reveals socio-cultural issues and subjugation of women.

Key words: *socio-cultural, subjugation, East-West, exploitation, superstition, violence.*

Introduction:

An author, politician, and former international civil servant, Shashi Tharoor straddles several worlds of experience. Currently a second-term Lok Sabha MP representing the Thiruvananthapuram constituency and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, he has previously served as Minister of State for Human Resource Development and Minister of State for External Affairs in the Government of India. During his nearly three-decade long prior career at the United Nations, he served as a supporter of peace, refugee worker, and administrator at the highest levels, serving as Under-Secretary General during Kofi Annan's leadership of the organization. Dr. Tharoor is an award-winning author of both fiction as well as non-fiction. In 1998, the World Economic Forum in Davos named him a "Global Leader of Tomorrow". He is also a recipient of several awards that include a Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, India's highest honour for overseas nationals. In 2012, the King of Spain awarded him the Encomienda de la Real Order Espanola de Carlos III. Among numerous other awards are one for "New Age Politician of the Year" from NDTV, the Hakim Khan Sur Award for National Integration, and the Priyadarshini Award for Excellence in Diplomacy.

Tharoor's renowned first novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) brings out parallel study between characters of the Mahabharata and the Indian political leaders. His second novel *Show Business* (1992) satirises the paradoxes in Bollywood film industry. It is also about a more trenchant indictment of corruption in Indian public life. The novel *Riot* (2001) traces the events of cultural activism and religious confrontation in the Indian scenario. It is a study of the East-West cultural clash against the backdrop of the communal disturbances following the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992.

Posting the novel *Riot* amidst the morbid sectarian clashes in 1989 in North India, Shashi Tharoor explores not only socio-cultural issues and women subjugation but the cultural diversity

in Native India as well. He voices his assertive views on how culture is broken up due to the hatred between communities, and carefully delves into the controversy over the Babri Masjid. The backdrop of the novel is set in 1989 when Ram Sila Poojan Programme was undertaken by Hindus to rebuild the temple in Ram Janma Bhoomi which led to the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992.

The story of the novel begins with the report entitled 'AMERICAN SLANE IN INDIA' published on Monday, October 2, 1989 in the New York Journal which brings the central event i.e. Priscilla Hart's death into high light. Besides, a few articles concerning her mysterious and untimely murder resulting death feature in the journal during the following days. In it, Tharoor gives detailed illustration about the mysterious murder of Priscilla portraying the victim's life and family.

Presenting Priscilla Hart as a volunteer of social services, Tharoor has a synoptic view of the social conditions of India. The entire novel revolves around the character of Priscilla Hart. She is twenty-four years old, a slender figure, blonde and blue eyed American volunteer who works with the non-governmental association HELP-US. She is totally involved in a developing awareness among females about population control. Her father's job has brought her to India when she was only fifteen. She came across the only Indians during the period of her stay in India viz: the servants, the lower class, peoples with their poverty, the bazaars, the movies, the temples and the mosque. She worked actively for the social service league, read to blind children, cared for the underside of the society and helped at the Catholic orphanage. But during her stay in India an incident changed her life. One afternoon, she finds her father sleeping in a bed room with his secretary Nandini. Finally, it results into a divorce between Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart. Priscilla is unable to forgive her father for his misdeed. She utters –

...But I cannot forgive him. Not just for doing what he did, hurting Mom, destroying the family I'd always taken for granted but also for being careless enough and thoughtless enough to do it there, in Mom's and his bed, on that afternoon and letting me find him. (p.71)

Thus, the Rudyard-Nandini episode not only highlights the formers attitude of a conqueror but also foregrounds the latter's high opinion about the occidental world.

Exemplifying a feeling of inferiority ingrained into her psyche, Nandini surfaces as a synonym to Lakshman. It is through both these characters that Tharoor brings out the subservient mentality of the Indians who continue to look up to the West with acquiescence in the contemporary postcolonial times in the novel. Tharoor's *Riot* therefore hints at the continuity of 'colonization' of the third world both by foreigners such as Priscilla and Rudyard, and by 'natives' exploiting their own people as observed in the treatment meted out by Lakshman and Nandini to their respective families and spouses.

Tharoor depicts degradation of the Indian society in the present novel. He also throws light on extra-marital affairs. He not only talks about pre-marital relations but post-marital affairs as well. This fact is made clear by depicting the characters like Rudyard, Lakshman, Nandini and Priscilla. Indeed extra-marital affair has been the problem with the people in India. This has been very concerning issue in India though we Indians boast of our culture. Tharoor skillfully and satirically exposes the beauty under the cloths and presents humbug picture of the Indian society.

Tharoor reflects Indian kaleidoscopic culture that consists of a continuous play of history, culture and power. Apart from these divisions and discriminations haunting India, another cause for the cultural collisions and communal tensions in the country is religion. Parallel to these discriminations and ideological discussions is the plot that traces the story of the 24-year-old American student Priscilla Hart, who is killed mysteriously in a communal riot. The compelling panorama drawn by Tharoor evokes the disturbed life of the opposing communities and the atrocities of communal and cultural difference. The quest to understand India is another key point in the novel. India holds multiple identities and Tharoor upholds that India can thrive only if it appreciates the myriad cultures and histories contained within its borders. Different ideological dispositions put up new different histories in accordance with race, gender and class. Priscilla Hart is unable to make herself feel free with the culturally constructed forms of Indian knowledge, beliefs, codes and customs. Each contradictory identity has been constructed with an "imagining of history". As the riots arise due to the clash in identities, she too gets destructed in the riots.

Being zealous and sympathetic for the upliftment of society, Tharoor takes sincere efforts so as to take place social reforms. He skillfully portrays the picture of the higher and lower strata

of the Indian society. While delineating characters, Tharoor has a synoptic view of the social scenario in India. Hence, he selects typical men and women to depict social ideology in India. Even after knowing that Lakshman is married and having a daughter, Priscilla madly falls in love with him. Lakshman, too, finds Priscilla, someone with whom he could actually talk, discuss anything. Their rendezvous at the Kotli help them to know each other in every way. Their talks range from culture, history, politics and concept of marriage, to their past. This relationship develops to such an extent that Lakshman at times thinks of deserting Geetha for Priscilla with whom he plans to shift to America. But the age old traditions desists him from doing so and he confesses this to Priscilla –

... forgive me, but I must end our relationship. I love you but I cannot leave my wife, my daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my love. (p.239)

Priscilla, too, accepts this and plans to leave India after meeting him for the last time at Kotli. Her last visit to Kotli, to meet Lakshman, proves fatal. This relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla presents the existing hypocrisy in the marriage institution. The conjugal life between Lakshman and Geetha is loveless. Though they both are socially united, they are mismatched in their personal lives. The reading community doesn't find any physical, psychological, emotional and understanding level or maturity between both of them. On the contrary, the relationship between Lakshman and Geetha is hilarious and harmonious one. But it is social taboo which disharmonizes their relationship. As far as Indian wives are concerned, they are more concerned about their husbands. They regard their husband more than the God. They are socially and culturally bonded and stuck to Indian culture.

Though Lakshman thinks Priscilla as a better replacement for Geetha, the social taboos restrict him to continue the illegal and illicit relationship with Priscilla. Meanwhile, he is caught between lime and fire and so is torn between two kinds of love. Finally, he selects his love for his daughter over his love for Priscilla. His love for his daughter is more deserving than his love for Priscilla. Thus, it is the love of daughter which helps to unite the family. There are a number of cases like this as far as the Indian society is concerned. Tharoor wants to highlight such relationship which deceives the family. He mildly rebukes the social issues and social taboos by delineating the characters like Rudyard Hart, Nandini, Lakshman and Priscilla.

Geetha, who is traditionally married to Lakshman, finds out about her husband's affair and helplessly seeks support from the God and Swamiji. Tharoor highlights on the problem of superstitions in India. Superstition plays a vital role in shaping and forming the destiny of Indian people. Indians believe in myths, stars, astrology and the lines on palms. Tharoor delineates the character of Lakshman's wife Geetha who is the representative of superstitious class. Geetha is presented both religious and superstitious by nature. A time comes when Geetha comes to know that Lakshman has decided to elope with Priscilla Hart to the USA, she goes to the temple of Lord Shiva and Swamiji. Instead of asking and considering about Lakshman's cunning deeds, she not only prays but also seeks the blessings from Lord Shiva so as to save her conjugal relationship.

He said my husband was in love with another woman and wanted to leave me. It was the yellow-haired American woman, of course. And he was thinking of leaving my daughter and me and running off with her to America. (p. 226)

Similarly she undergoes fasts and tries to seek blessings from the divine world. She implores Swamiji to conduct a special puja for her to help her have her husband. So she visits the Shiv Mandir on every Saturday where the Swamiji resides. To resolve this problem she speaks to Swamiji –

... What can I do Swamiji? I cannot talk to him about this it would kill me if I had to tell him what I knew! I can only turn to God, Swamiji, and to you. Please conduct a special puja for me to help me keep my husband. (p. 227)

Through the portrayal of Geetha, Tharoor opens up a vista of the every residing superstitious attitude of a traditional wife. She is ready to do anything to protect her family. She does nothing, but expects a lot from God and Swamiji. She is ready to pay any amount for it –

... I don't care about the expense; I don't care how you do it. Use tantra, do the tandavaa, use anyone and anything you want, Swamiji, but please don't let this foreign devil – woman with my husband. (p. 227)

In *Riot*, Tharoor does not simply confine male chauvinism to the unaware and the uneducated stratum of Zalilgarh's society but also highlights its marked presence among the

educated and the higher class of its social structure. It is Ali, Fatema Bi's husband, who asserts his despotic right to govern the latter's life by remarking –

"I decide how my wife conducts her life.... Not her", but also the likes of the district magistrate of the town V. Lakshman, and the superintendent of police Gurinder Singh who show little respect for women. (p. 160)

Priscilla talks about the Islamic culture. The said culture is shown through the eyes of Priscilla. While presenting the character of Fatema Bi, Priscilla talks about the Islamic tradition that an Islam woman has to wear a burqa when she goes out. She is not supposed to remove it at public place. This is what Tharoor wants to introduce the Islamic culture in India.

... Anyway, she's covered from head to toe in traditional garb – a long robe leaving only her face bare, but she also wears a scarf over her head, and I bet she has to put on a burqa when she goes out. (p. 159)

Tharoor portrays the shallowness of Lakshman's personality, bereft of concern, and respect for his family, his job and his nation. Lakshman evaluates his affair with Priscilla as an avenue to a comfortable life in America. He avers –

Priscilla is consolation, she is escape, but she is more than that: she is a fantasy come true, the possibility of an alternative life, as if another planet had flung its doors open for me. (p.155)

Priscilla's beauty infatuates Lakshman though he is married. He finds pleasure and solace with her company. Both Lakshman and Priscilla visit the Kotli, the meeting place, on every Tuesday and Saturday neglecting familial and service responsibilities. Lakshman is unable to forget Priscilla as his days on the job are illuminated by the images of Priscilla's face and body and the memory of her touch. Lakshman emotionally reveals –

When I am with her I am in a constant state of exhilaration. I greet her with glee as runs into my arms; I exult as she disrobes for me; I am ecstatic as we make – that word again – love. Until Priscilla I had never really known the pleasure of sex. (p. 156)

Geetha, Lakshman's wife, after seeing Lakshman's business she neither initiates nor welcomes life. Though they lead conjugal life, they spend loveless nine years of marriage.

Geetha turns away from Lakshman. There is no clear and mutual understanding between both of them as Lakshman's attention is diverted due to his intimacy with Priscilla Hart. He frankly admits and reveals –

Not surprisingly, we make love less and less frequently. Since Priscilla entered my life, I have slept with Geetha just once. Neither of us misses it. (p. 156)

Tharoor depicts violence against women in India. Violence in home and outside against women is a common social evil in India. Not only urban women but also rural women bear the oppression and exploitation by males. They are subjected to physical and mental assault. The women class feels that they are not safe anywhere be in the offices or at the public places or at homes. One notices the plight of the Indian women. Tharoor has a birds' eye view to study social evils in the society. Therefore, he raises several social issues like exploitation of women, dowry system, marriage problems, extra-marital affairs, pre-marital relations between opposite sexes, etc. In India after every 93 minutes, a married woman is burnt alive resulting in death. This occurs due to the social evil dowry which is rampant in the Indian society. Besides, women are marginalized in male dominated Indian society. They are afraid of their male counterparts. The Indian society and its allied institutions have restricted and reserved fields in the life of Indian women. Tharoor raises his social ideology so as to imply the women's marginalization in India. The characters like Fatima Bi, Geetha, Sundary, and Kadambari are the microcosm of the Indian women's loss of freedom. Social violence is depicted as a weapon to establish patriarchal power in the novel. It is only through violence that the search for identity is silenced in Priscilla Hart as well as in Fatima Bi. Gender inequality generates itself through social attitude and cultural institutions.

Sundari is depicted as a symbol of women's subjugation in the novel. She is the married sister of Kadambari who is co-colleague of Priscilla. She is a helpless prey of the male dominated society. Even though, she is very honest and loyal, Rupesh, her husband and mother-in-Law beat her every now and then. She is hated and cursed as a witch all the time though her father gives one lakh rupees as a dowry in her marriage. Thus, the evil of dowry is highlighted through the letter of Priscilla to Cindy Valeriani.

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In many parts of India a government job is the ultimate accomplishment, and being in the IAS is the government job to end all government jobs. So fathers of eligible daughters double the dowries on offer when an IAS candidate heaves into view. Listen to one story: Lucky tells me a couple of his college friends fell in love and wanted to get married. (p. 93)

Sundari is given maltreatment and is placed inferior to male. She is accused of her luck as a few months after their marriage; Rupesh has to lose his job. After that Sundari gets worse treatment in the family. All the members in the family blame her accounting her bad luck which brings unhappiness to the family. That's why; the birth of a girl child is not a welcome thing in India. For many Indians, the birth of a male child is considered as the line of the family and a welcome thing. The family members of Sundari are no exception to this fact. They expect the birth of a male child from Sundari. They wrongly think that women are responsible for begetting a male or female baby. When Sundari gets pregnant that time her mother-in-law reiterates and condemns-

What use is this woman who does no work around the house and can not even produce a son? (p. 248)

In presence of Sundari's mother-in-law, Rupesh burns Sundari alive mercilessly. When the police inquire about Sundari's death, the case is foisted as the kitchen mishap. Kadambari's reply to a specific question startles everyone that there are a few dozen kitchen mishaps as the same which take place in Zalilgarh every year. However, the poor and helpless parents in Zalilgarh never step to court because of their poverty and disillusionment. They only mutter:

Who will fill the disgrass of her broken marriage, and face a mountain of unpaid debts from the wedding and hospitalization of their daughter. (p. 249)

Summing up:

On the whole, Tharoor in *Riot* depicts the socio-cultural issues, ethos and subjugation of women. He deftly exposes how women in India do not enjoy a respectable position. Women are considered as weak, inferior to men and are marginalized as if they are playthings in the hands of their husbands or protectors. Similarly, they do not think about women's health, hygiene and

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desire as they force them for repeated child births so as to change their destiny. Indian women are so submissive that they cannot raise any question concerning their welfare; rather they submit to the demand of their men-folk and accept any number of pregnancies. Being forced to have babies is one form of oppression by men. They are seemingly wise but weak to stand up and fight against the prison house of their tradition and society in limiting their family. Thus, *Riot* examines some of the socio-cultural vital issues like premarital/ extramarital relationship, dowry deaths, subordination of women, superstitions, violence in home and outside, gender inequality, and exploitation of women in Indian society. In short, Tharoor's *Riot* presents a microcosm of ill effects on Indian women due to male dominated society.

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