

Postcolonial Traits in Shashi Tharoor's Novel *Riot*

Rajkumar B. Bhairam
Assistant Professor
Deptt. of English
Jagat College, Goregaon
E mail: bhairamraj@gmail.com
Mob.No. 9765388359

Abstract

India's encounter with England had a massive impact which is persistent in different spheres and different discourses. Through governance, spectacle and a multiplicity of other avenues, the common Indian and the educated elite formed ideas, estimates and assessments of the English, their culture, and the country from which they came. In the case of the new elite created by English higher education, particularly education in English literature and English history, encounters with the English in India. At the same time the direct experience of England as visitors or immigrants, produced many images of England and the English. Educated Indians were no doubt, in many way deeply involved in the colonial process. In many cases they employed the knowledge and "control" of the English language to regain narrative control and to resist the essential representation and containment of India in colonialist discourse. The ideas and attitudes of these various classes find frequent representations in Indian literary forms and other forms of writing.

Literature in English by Indian writers reflects the Indo-British encounter in various ways and a study of representations of England and the English. Such is the case in the writing of ShashiTharoor. He has three novels to his credit – The Great Indian Novel, Show Business and Riot: A Novel. Those novels reflect the postcolonial aspects in different perspectives. The present paper attempts to analyze the postcolonial traits in the novel Riot: A Novel.

The era of imperialism has finally passed and today most of the colonies have attained an independent status. Yet, an examination of these developing nations of the Third world brings to light the diverse problems that clearly are a legacy of imperialism. The damage done to the economy of these countries is undoubtedly, immense. Colonialism has been a recurrent and widespread feature of human history. The relation between literature and the historical phenomenon of imperialism has been a long and intimate one. In fact, literature played the key role in validating the imperial rule.

It was in the early part of the twentieth century, when the power and glory of Empire began to wane, that the monopoly on imperial writing was broken and the colonized elites could articulate their protest against the imperial power, which they did by appropriating the language and literary forms of the colonizers. The early part of the twentieth century was marked by the emergence of colonial national writing which sought to subvert Western cultural hegemony as well as recover and reaffirm the suppressed identity of the colonized subject. This may be supposed to be the beginning of postcolonial writing in the colonies, which since has been a proliferating area of interest for intellectuals. Many works by Indian writers in English represent Indian attitude and responses to England, the British rule, the English language and education, decades after the cessation of the British rule in India. These responses bear testimony to the lasting impact of the colonial encounter on Indian society. England, the British rule and the English language are interwoven into the fabric of postcolonial Indian life and are necessarily reflected in the Indian literatures. The lasting impact of colonial history results in many responses such as reactionary nativism, a perceived need for continuing resistance and uncritical or unwilling indoctrination.

ShashiTharoor's *Riot: A Novel* was published particularly when Indian writing in English was gaining a lot of attention and the 'Hindutva' was struggling to reclaim its identity. This struggle for reclaiming identity provoked communal riots all over the country resulting into a senseless killing. The postcolonial flavor is created with superb skill in the novel. The character of Priscilla Hart adds more the postcolonial aspect to the novel. The novel expresses the anguish of isolation and the social milieu of Indian society. It is set on the background of Hindu-Muslim cultural conflict that led to the demolition of Babri Masjid. Religious hatred is the book's central theme. The cultural conflict between Hindu and Muslim is the decisive creation of the British in colonial India to weaken the nation's strength by sowing the seeds of communalism between Hindus and Muslims. This has been dealt in detail in *The Great Indian Novel* also. But the after-effects of the colonialism had been seen in the postcolonial era after India's independence. With the Hindutva Brigade's passion for India as a country of Hindu, makes them sharpen their weapons against Muslims resulting into the demolition of Babri Masjid. The novel also focuses on the East-West counter through the characters of Rudyard Hart, Katherine Hart and through the paper-cuttings of American newspapers.

It is significant that Indian nationalism as represented by elites is a consequence of the expectation of power and wealth which comes out of collaboration with the British culture and institutions. Although theirs could well be a national emergence with the idealist need to lead the country to freedom, the masses are seen as involving themselves in the political process out of a blind charisma of the elite leadership. This narrow view was the creation of the British colonial rule. The power structure created by the British was finally perpetuated by the national elites. This view virtually ignores the existence of a society. The society, in

spite of its subjugation, made itself felt in national politics by often breaking away from its elitist superiors. This is evident in the novel *Riot*. In *Riot*, the postcolonial experience dealing with the political social issues has been rendered exquisitely by Tharoor.

In *Riot: A Novel*, Tharoor has used major non-Indian characters. Tharoor explores every aspect of India through Priscilla Hart and the question that haunts the readers is way a 'Foreigner' to explore India. Tharoor in an interview defends himself by saying –

.... Because very often we define ourselves in relation to others and because a foreigner comes with a certain level of both innocence and a lack of understanding that helps illuminate for those who are trying to read a story like this. (Tharoor, Interview)

The statement itself makes clear that the countries all over the world have come closer than the past and the culture of one country in one way or another effects the other country. This is one of the aspects of postcolonialism.

The novel revolves around Priscilla Hart, a 24 year old American Volunteer with non-governmental association HELP-US, who is involved in developing awareness among females about population control. Her father's job has brought her to India the first time when she was fifteen. The only Indians, she came across during the period are, the servants, the lower class people with all its poverty, the bazaars, the movies, the temples and the mosques. She works actively for the social service league, read to blind children, helped at the Catholic orphanage and cared for the underside of the society. But during this stay, an incident changed her life. One afternoon she finds her father in bed with his secretary Nandini, ultimately leading towards a divorce between Rudyard and Katherine, her mother. Priscilla says that she cannot forgive her father for this –

But I can't 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. (*Riot* 79)

After nine years, she returns back to work as volunteer with NGO –HELP US. She falls in love with V. Lakshman, the District Magistrate though she knows that he is a married man with a well-cultured Hindu woman Geetha and having a daughter. She has firm faith in her love and at a time when she decides to tell Lakshman about the child she has been growing in her womb, she gets murdered during the riot. The mystery of her death doesn't get resolved. Tharoor, here, makes focus on Western culture of how they treat love and sex. Priscilla Hart, on her part, had been hurt by her father, Rudyard Hart's illicit relation with his secretary, Nandini, ignoring his wife, Katherine Hart. She gets disgusted with her father. But after nine years, she repeats the same mistake that her father had done before (causing on her part a great hatred for him). This shows the impracticality on Priscilla's part focusing on Western culture.

The relationship between Lakshman and Priscilla presents the existing hypocrisy in the marriage institution. But Lakshman, on his part, is a true Hindu. He believes the Hindu culture. He is desperately hanging between right and wrong – his love for his daughter along with his responsibility for his wife and the love for Priscilla Hart. His relationship with Priscilla develops to such an extent that he 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. I just can't go on giving you the hope of a future together and returning home to the reality of my present. I believe it is more honest to tell you that what you want cannot be. (Riot239)

Geetha, who is traditionally married to Lakshman, finds out about her husband's affair and, helplessly turns to God. 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! (Riot227)

Through Geetha, Tharoor opens up a vista of the every residing superstitious attitude of 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 tandava, use anyone and anything you want, Swamiji, but please don't let this foreign devil-woman run away with my husband.... (Riot227)

It sounds quite anomalous but this has been and still is pertinent attitude of Indian women, however, educated she may be. She always finds solace in shifting the responsibility of getting her problems solved by God or Swami. On the other side is Priscilla, who is very eager to create her world with Lakshman, with an uncaring attitude about his background –

I don't care about your background.... I love you. Not your family, not your village, not your caste, not your background. I love you. And that's all that matters to me. (Riot89)

It is the Westernized image of Lakshman that appeals to Priscilla who talks, writes, reads, thinks in a way she does. Their love develops against all odds. It is through their regular Tuesday and Saturday meet they create their new world. But this love rather than providing pleasure creates fear, tension and insecurity. It was through that they found love, which brought along with it confusion, uncertainty. For Priscilla, sex was a means of expressing her love, a way of giving herself to the man she loved. She is completely baffled at the idea of marrying someone whom she even doesn't know. The concept of traditional

Indian marriage, of marrying someone whom our elders select in a brief visit, could not be the basis of a lifetime commitment. She doesn't expect this from Lakshman, who is educated and Western in his outlook. She feels betrayed when she finds that the man she loves extremely has no room for her in his life. Priscilla, for Lakshman, only happens to be attendant of Tuesday and Saturday. She thinks that he has failed to understand her true feelings for him. He, for her is 'Mr.Right in the wrong place at the wrong time'. To come out of it he has to pay the price of moving to America which he does not. This results into a parting of the loved ones. In a letter to Cindy Valeriani, she writes –

I saw so much in Lucky –a good man in a bad marriage, someone capable of love who had no opportunity to love until I came along, a man who hadn't seen his own unhappiness fully until he met me. With me I think he realized for the first time that he hadn't truly known love in his life and that he could find happiness loving and being loved. Happiness, of course, at a price. A price that in the end he was not prepared – with his upbringing, his sense of his responsibilities, his inability to escape from Indian society –to pay. (Riot241)

It is Rekha, Lakshman's daughter, who holds her father from forsaking his family. The name, Rekha, which means a line, symbolically becomes a line of control. Priscilla's failure lies in getting familiar with only one identity out of the various identities of Lakshman, who is a man of multiple identities, husband, father, district magistrate, Hindu, a man with Western outlook, also a poet and has aspirations of becoming a writer and also a passionate lover. Rather than confronting with all these identities she makes her familiar with an identity identical to her. Lakshman, moreover, plays the part of the protagonist. This man, knowingly or unknowingly, gets attracted towards Priscilla. For him, initially, it is just an affair which happened accidentally. In their first meet, the prevailing consciousness makes him aware that he shouldn't be doing this. But as time passes, their Tuesday and Saturday meet becomes a convention. At times he even can't understand why she got attracted towards him. But still he continues this relationship to an extent that the very thought of Priscilla returning to her homeland creates panic in him. He has been so habitual of their rendezvous that he can no longer imagine even a week without Priscilla. Priscilla, for him is 'consolation' she is escape, but she is more than that; she is fantasy come true, the possibility of an alternative life'. He gets so obsessed with this consolation, of escaping that he at times even thinks of quitting his job and moving to America. His nine loveless years of marriage with Geetha is one of the causes that he gets attracted towards Priscilla. Geetha has a different outlook towards sex, in her amatory role, she neither initiates nor welcomes, she is to endure rather than enjoy. Contrary to this comes Priscilla, with all the pleasures of sex, for her it is joy, celebration for she gives as much as she takes. For Lakshman being with her and

enjoying sex is process of carnal discovery with an endless delight. In this way, sex plays a very vital role in bringing them too close.

In spite of all this, Lakshman decides to end this relationship. He does not give up his house, his country, his service, his wife and his daughter for Priscilla. It is his affection for Rekha which prevents him back from doing these things. His love for his daughter wins over his love for Priscilla. He realizes the responsibility –

..... that I could not deny these to her and still feel myself a worthy human being. That having brought her into the world, I had a responsibility, an obligation, to see her through those difficult years of growing up, secure in the environment of a predictable two-parent family structure. And that if I failed to fulfil this obligation in pursuing my own happiness, I would in fact find no happiness at all. (Riot240)

Lakshman succumbs to the pressure of the father-daughter relationship and its agitations. Priscilla arranges a last meeting with Lakshman at Kotli to tell him about a child growing in her womb. But Lakshman fails to reach there on time and when he reaches there he learns about the death of Priscilla. Thus, the cultural collision is brought into focus through the novel.

The seed of communal hatred was sown by the British colonial rule in India. This seed is grown into a plant devastating the communal harmony in independent India. The theme of communal hatred is focused in the novel. This communal hatred is focused through Ramcharan Gupta– the Hindu fundamentalist, Mohammad Sarwar– the Muslim and Gurinder Singh– the superintendent of police. In the novel, the span, that Tharoor prefers to trace, starts with the pre-independence Hindu-Muslim unity and ends up with riots related to the Ramjanmabhoomi– Babri Masjid issue, widening the rift between these two communities. It was the unity of these two communities, which plays a vital role in securing freedom for India. Shashi Tharoor expresses the views of Muslim community and their dream image of a secular India. Amidst those sheelapoojan agitations, Mohammad Sarwar recites the speech of Maulana Abul Kalam Azad which he had delivered as the President of Indian National Congress at Ramgarh in 1940. He considers this speech as the greatest testament of the faith of religious Muslims in united India. This speech voiced the sentiments of every Muslim and asserts India as their homeland —

.....I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality..... I am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete. I am an essential element which has gone to build India. I can never surrender this claim. (Riot108)

The freedom struggle, which asserts the feeling of Indianness, leads in terms of national entity devoid of imagining of the formation of Pakistan. But along with freedom came the partition, which shattered the national identity. The entire Muslim community is

held responsible for this. With his entire defence, Mohammad Sarwar rather than considering his community responsible for partition, accuses them who motivated this two-nation theory
....Muslim didn't partition the country –the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did. (Riot111)

With partition, even the altogether view about Muslims changed the Muslims, who affirmed Islam's claim on this soil (India) and has been residing in India from the past eleven centuries spreading the message of human equality, after partition suffered discrimination. They are now considered strangers, who owe loyalty to a different religion. This discriminating attitude gives rise to a question, which hurts this intellectual Muslim. He finds himself displaced—

Where do Indian Muslims like myself fit in? I've spent my life thinking of myself as part of "us" – now there are Indians, respectable Indians, Indians winning votes, who say that I'm really "them"! (Riot114)

What hurts this Muslim protagonist is that he is forced to suffer for what he is not responsible. It is revenge taken on him for what his ancestors had done in the past. He suffers the humiliation of being thrown away from the mainstream, which generates insecure feelings in him. In this light he visualizes a change in the dominant ethos of the country, in the attitudes, in the ongoing agitations of Ramshilapoojan. This for him is a presage; history repeating itself –

The Hindutva brigade is busy trying to invent a new past for the nation, fabricating historical wrongs they want to right, dredging up "evidence" of Muslim malfeasance, and misappropriation of national glory. They are making us into a large-scale Pakistan; they are vindicating the two-nation theory. (Riot67)

The intensity of this insecurity, fear, increased when the BhartiyaJanata Party and its Hindutva allies raises the Mandir-Masjid issue. It is a communal movement, which is motivated politically to reap the benefits of Hindu vote bank. ShashiTharoor exposes the communalization of politics and points out a sordid picture of its consequences. The Hindus are provoked by reminding him of the humiliation suffered in the past and also in the present under the disguise of secularism. This Sheelapoojan agitation tries to ignite the spark in this community, which they thought has been stamped. This agitation took up the whole country, ending in bloody senseless killing and destruction rather than creating an identity.

RamCharan Gupta, the Hindu protagonist with his Hindu ideologies, makes us familiar with the intense zeal of Hindutva. For him, it is essential for the Hindu to awake, if India is to be illuminated. He, alike his leaders, constantly reminds the Hindus about the invasions and destructions caused by Muslim rulers, so as to provoke them. Gupta considers that demolition of temples in the past is a deliberately adopted imperial strategy to demoralize and humiliate the Hindus. It is all done with an intention to subjugate the Hindus. He also holds this community responsible for the partition of India and Pakistan. For him, this is his

motherland whereas Muslims as intruders owe their loyalty to some distant land and an alien regiment –

They are more loyal to a foreign religion, Islam, than to India. They are all converts from the Hindu faith of their ancestors, but they refuse to acknowledge this, pretending instead that they are all descended from conquerors of Arabia or Persia, or Samarkand.... Why do they stay here if they will not assimilate into our country? (Riot54)

What disturbs Gupta more is the pampering of this community done under name of secularism. As a part of this pampering only he finds that privileges are bestowed by providing financial aid to visit Haj and the government subsidies for the Muslim educational institution. But what troubles him most is that –

...they have even managed special status for the only Muslim-majority state we have, Kashmir. Do you know a Hindu from anywhere else in the country cannot buy a piece of land in Kashmir?! And worst of all, these Muslims are outbreeding the Hindus. (Riot55)

The sheelapoojan agitation triggered off the suppressed hatred against each other. The resistance that Hindus face, both from the administration and the Muslim community challenge their tolerance. But the Muslims consider this as an attempt to wipe off their existence from this land. The proudly boasted slogan of ‘unity in diversity’ finds itself replaced by numerous insulting slogans against each other. It is clear from the virulence and naked aggression of the BhartiyaJanata Party and its Hindutva allies that they are out to accomplish their goal. For them the temple has become the matter of faith. Thus, the communal hatred among Hindus and Muslims is prominently focused in the novel.

Lakshman stands as a spokesman of secular India against Ram Charan Gupta and Mohd. Sarwar. For him, India stands as ‘an extraordinary, polygot, polychrome, polyconfessional country with five major resources of division –language, region, caste, class and religion. All those things make it different for community to assert its supremacy. Lakshman considers himself as a Hindu, but of a different type. Rather than constructing temples with bricks and stones he prefers to build temple in his mind. For him Hinduism is not a label of identity but a set of human beliefs, the only major religion, which doesn’t claim to be the only religion. He is more concerned about the development of religious sense with a political outlook that is taking hold of the country. Thus, Lakshman is practical in his views and attitudes with Westernized glamour.

The widening rift between two communities is a major cause in creating social instability. Tharoor is more concerned about this for he finds it odd that when the world is moving towards globalization, he finds his country struggling to solve the identity crisis. The social vista is explored through the eyes of Priscilla Hart, Randy Diggs, Shankar Das. It is through them, Tharoor depicts the social exploitation of women in India. Shankar Das,

Kadambari have enabled themselves to explore these conditions through their project HELP-US. Kadambari takes Mrs. Katherine Hart to the women's ward in Zalilgarh hospital. Mrs. Hart experiences here 'horror of the woman's ward'. She moves into the hospital filled with the stale mall of sweat and chemicals through blood stained rags, bins, narrow metal cots and women lying on the floor. She visits those women whom Priscilla had helped in her life time. For Katherine Hart this was like experiencing –

... the whole female chamber of horrors in this overcrowded and desperately poor country. (Riot246)

Here she comes across Sundari, Kadambari's sister; less than 19 lying like a mummy, moaning with every breath, for she has burns over 75%. She, in her feeble voice, narrates her story. It starts with the dowry given by her father by applying a loan. The initial days of love fades up to give her the experience of reality, which is harsh and sardonic. With regular beating from the mother-in-law, she finds herself all alone, for her husband had turned away from her. Then follow complaints about dowry. To add more to her trouble she finds herself pregnant with her tests indicating a girl in her womb, turning everything horrible. Her mother-in-law remarked, 'What use is this woman who does no work around the house and cannot even produce a son?' (Riot248) The story ends with her mother-in-law and her husband splashing kerosene, and setting her on fire. She is saved by her neighbours. This too, alike other incidents, was considered a 'kitchen accident'. Through Sundari, Tharoor narrates the evils of dowry, the trauma that majority of Indian houses had gone through. It is Kadambari who points the finger towards a major problem –

... this is real issue for women in India. Not population control, but violence against women. In our own homes. (Riot249)

Katherine gets a glimpse of stark reality of the status of women in Indian society. For Priscilla, India stands as a country where –

..... Appearances are more important than truths. Gossip is more potent than facts. Loyalty is all one way, from the woman to the man. And when society stacks up all odds against a woman, she'd better not count on the man's support. She has no way out other than to end her own life. (Riot63)

Those experiences give a sordid picture of the status of women, which to a certain extent have remained unchanged as compared to colonial era. Though to a certain extent this stands close to truth, but it also in a way projects the 'Western outlook' towards India. Rather than the glorious rich cultural heritage, the Westerners are more concerned about exploring the darker side of India.

Priscilla's death comes as a blow to Lakshman's retching soul. Lakshman blames it on communal passion. The embassy considers this as a coincidence and states that she must have been 'in the wrong place at the wrong time'. On a large scale, Priscilla symbolically represents the munificent Western helping hand eager to improve the social conditions in

India. To a certain extent this can also be considered as a Western influence working for a better prospect. But this helping hand is crushed in the communal frenzy. Lakshman represents the bureaucracy, which fails to form a cordial relationship with this western influence. Priscilla explores the social conditions of India and at the same time questions the validity of age-old traditions followed in India. The futility of the institution of Marriage is fully exposed. The social service centres are more remembered for their inefficiency rather than their work. Kotli symbolically represents India, a state of decayed glimpses of glorious past with a mirror pitted back with age in places haunted and full of myths and legends. Her task in this complex land remains unfulfilled.

Rudyard Hart came to India as a Marketing Director to revive the sale of coca-cola in the year 1977. At this time, the country was in the state of emergency proclaimed by the Prime Minister Indira Gandhi in mid-1975. His services in the multinational corporation, Coca-Cola offers him a chance to fulfill his dream. He exposes the emergency and post-emergency era. He arrives in India in January 1977 when the Government was making all the right noises about opening up the economy to foreign investment. He came to India to win it with Coke. He thought that with a new strategy he could definitely increase the sale of Coca-Cola. He has a conservative estimate of a Coke for a week, per middle class Indian, which he thought is not impossible. His colleague Kisan Mehta makes him aware of a law passed recently FERA – Foreign Exchange Regulation Act, which governs the activities of the companies involved in international trade. Under the provision of this law, the foreign companies do the business in India have to reapprove their registration. This is considered as just another bureaucratic requirement in a country obsessed with forms and procedures. They applied for it. While their case was pending, an anti-Coke wave emerged in the country. Coke was accused of looting the country, destroying the health of Indians. George Fernandes opposed it vehemently for he thought clean drinking water was more essential than coke. But at the same time, Mrs. Gandhi declared election and was defeated. A coalition government came into power. In the Cabinet, George Fernandes was the Minister for Industry.

Thus, the novel reveals the postcolonial perspective. The novel portrays the cultural conflicts among people of different religions, faiths and cultures. It focuses on the conflict among Indian and American attitude through the character of Lakshman and Priscilla Hart. The novel focuses on the British policy of 'divide and rule' and its influence in the present India which is struggling with religious crisis. The postcolonial flavor is created in the novel with superb skill.

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