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Complexity of Human Relationships in “Riot”: Shashi Tharoor

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Abstract:

The present paper attempts to study the complex relationships in the novel Riot by Shashi Tharoor. As the complexity in human relationship has always been an inseparable part of the human existence in the modern environment, it has been the part and parcel of modern writers' works and Shashi Tharoor is not an exception to this fact. Complexities in human relations create dilemma wherein the characters find themselves in an uncontrollable complicated situations, sometimes helpless to come out of the catastrophic situations, unavoidably harsh for themselves and their dear ones. How the different characters are trapped in their lives to play multiple roles among themselves at a time, is the core thrust of this paper.

Key Words: complex phenomenon, kindred soul, carnal pleasure, bitterness of revenge, professional commitment, undernourished bodies, multiple identities

Complexity in relationship has always been an inseparable part of the human existence in the modern environment, and consequently it has been the part and parcel of modern writers' works such as Tharoor. Many characters of Tharoor have been portrayed with this complex phenomenon. Tharoor has adopted a peculiar approach for characterizing complexity in human relationships, which is perceptible in his novel *Riot*. The study of this phenomenon, is remarkably significant in terms of its portrayal in the novel.

The novel *Riot* shows the complexity of human relationships. It revolves around the main protagonists in the novel, an IAS officer, Lakshman – Lucky who is in-charge of the fictitious district Zalilgarh, an Oscar Wilde- type quoting intellectual and a well-read man from one of the elite schools in India - a side of India which his beloved Priscilla Hart had never known before. He can be identified as Lucky who is surprisingly clued in about the Western world. Priscilla Hart, an American volunteer who is serving for an NGO in Zalilgarh. She is a 24 year old, slim blond blue-eyed American volunteer with the non-governmental association HELP-US. She is involved for developing awareness among women regarding population control. Her father's job had brought her to India when she was just fifteen. The only Indians, she had come across during that time were, the servants, the lower class with all its poverty, the bazaars, the movies, the temples and the mosques. Priscilla works very actively for the social service league. She used to read to blind children, help at the Catholic orphanage and used to care for the 'underside of this society'. But during this stay, an incident suddenly changed her life, one afternoon she found her father in bed with his secretary, Nandini. It got very difficult to all of the family members to face each other and they were helpless to face each other. It ultimately led towards a divorce between Rudyard and Katherine and a kind of depression to herself which Priscilla did not forgive her father for-

But I cannot forgive him. Not just for doing what he did, hurting Mom, destroying their 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...

After 9 years Priscilla, once again, comes in India in Zalilgarh, a district town in U.P. Probably, nothing had changed during this period in India, except the increase in population. Zalilgarh comes alive in her poem 'Christmas in Zalilgarh'. This poem composed by her in her scrap book on 25th Dec. 1988, explains Zalilgarh as a town with mist of dust., cow dung sidewalks, rusting tin roofs, walls with red betel stains and angry black slogans with dirty brown men in their dirty dhotis and "...sad eyed women clad in gaily colored saris, clutching Babies, baskets, burdens too heavy for their undernourished bodies." All this makes her aware how difficult her task of female awareness is? Nobody has assisted her though she often visits the poor habitant to educate them about all that is to be done for population control. But nothing changes, for the women heed and come back to their age old practice by being submissive to the needs of their –

....Abusers, masters. One more baby comes, to wallow in misery with the rest. The task that she has undertaken is truly a difficult one. Rather than getting depressed, this earnest, idealistic and determined lady prays to God to Give me strength, oh lord to make things change. Give me the time to make a difference...

The Muslim women, Priscilla works with, love the idea of birth control but their menfolk terrorize this American lady with dire results if she continues to counsel the women. These women play strange roles in their lives. They are different with Priscilla and at home, they were merely puppets in the hands of their husbands who regularly succumb to their needs as merely dead bodies on beds. They find very helpless to raise voice against the trauma of their life due to the age-old conceptions and the traditional pressure. So, they continue to play dual roles at two different places. Even Kadambari who is an associate to Priscilla, is shaken. The lethargy in the office, Priscilla's project director, Shanker Das and her assistant Kadambari make it more difficult to the task for Shanker Das is more anxious about the statistical figures rather than practical achievements. The center for Priscilla is an 'ineffective place' whereas her field work has resulted into some 'upsetting development' particularly in the case of Fatima Bi who had aborted her eighth child. Her husband Ali, after knowing all this, charges down to the center, angry, with eyes bloodshot and red screaming 'I'll kill the foreign whore'. In all these drastic circumstances, hope of Priscilla rests on Laxman, the only man with whom she could share everything. In their first encounter she finds herself attracted towards him- "There was something about his voice that reached out and drew me in, something that was both inviting and yet reassuring. It was a voice like a warm embrace, a voice that was seductive but not a seducer's."

Priscilla is lonely in the town, Zalilgarh; she has her work but no companionship. Laxman is also like a kindred-soul in loneliness- he does not have anyone to talk to – there is possibly no one else in the district as well educated as him with the exception of Priscilla with whom he could express his feelings. She is also bewildered by how he had married to a woman with whom the only things he has in common were his caste and family background. He is

toying around with the idea of leaving his family for his love but he understands that it is something he just cannot do – it would go against the values deeply deep-rooted in him by his education and his culture. She realizes his inner conflict –he has found somebody to love, somebody with whom he can share his innermost fantasies but he gets in a very dilemmatic situation to choose love over his sense of duty to his family.

It is the Westernized image of Laxman that appeals to Priscilla who talks, writes, reads and thinks in a way she does. Their love develops against all odds. It is through their regular Tuesday and Saturday meet they create their world. But this love rather than creating pleasure creates fear, tension, insecurity, it was true that they found love but it brought along with it insecurity, confusion and uncertainty. For Priscilla, sex was "... a means of expressing my love, a way of giving myself to the man I loved." She is completely baffled at the idea of marrying someone whom you even don't know. The very concept of a traditional Indian marriage, of marrying someone whom your elders select in a brief visit, could not be the basis of a lifetime commitment. She does not expect this from Laxman, 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 Laxman 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 a price of moving to America, which he does not want. This results into a parting of the two loved ones.

In the languor of a lazy summer two helpless people Priscilla and Laxman find the magic of human chemistry, Lakshman and Priscilla are overpoweringly in love, notwithstanding his wife Geetha and daughter Rekha. Lakshman has never known carnal pleasure, for being devoted to his family as any good Indian would presumably be. Priscilla finds his mix of warmth and alien intelligence attractive - fatally so in the situations. Priscilla delves deep in love with this District Magistrate, Lakshman and they initiate to meet in a haunted house: called kotli. They get together clandestinely, but after an intense courtship, Lakshman decides that he cannot possibly desert his daughter whom he also loves. Even after knowing that he was married and having a daughter, Priscilla falls in love with him. Laxman 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 Laxman at times thinks of deserting Geetha for Priscilla with whom he plans to shift to America. But the age old tradition desists him from doing so and he openly confesses this to Priscilla, "Forgive me, but I must end up our relationship. I love you but I cannot leave my wife, my daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my love. A sort of confused state of mind develops hereby making Laxman restless at both roles but he confesses his dual roles.

Lakshman comments her question in his journal- "How could I, so well-read, so over-educated, so comfortable with her western culture, have had an arranged marriage?" (140) He shares with her that, according to his culture, a marriage is not between two individuals who are in love, it is between two families – love is expected to come after marriage. Priscilla too, accepts this and plans to leave India after meeting him for the last time at Kotli. To meet Laxman, proves fatal. They plan to meet for the last time on a Saturday. That is when the riots begin in the town. Lakshman cannot make it and Priscilla is killed in their secret meeting place. No one in the town can explain why anyone would wish to murder Priscilla. But, the innocent is

killed; it is whether the raw plot of jealousy or the bitterness of revenge that keeps the story on the crest of an emotional wave.

There are no clues left, no confessions anywhere. 'In riots all sorts of things happen', says Gurinder Singh, the police officer. 'People strike first and ask questions later.' This relationship between Laxman and Priscilla presents the existing hypocrisy in the marriage tradition. Laxman is, by tradition, married to Geetha. She finds out about her husband's matter and feebly turns to God. She visits the Shiv mandir, on every Saturday where 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.

Through Geetha, Tharoor opens up a vista of the every residing superstitious attitude of a traditional wife who plays her role as she is more bound to traditions. In spite of all the odds in her married life, she continues to play the role of a meek wife and a mother instead of protesting her husband. She is in dilemma over what to do. She is ready to do anything to protect her family except rebelling against her husband for his wrong doings. She is helpless to play a role of a mother and subsequently a meek wife so that she will not create any imbalance in the life of her daughter Rekha. Rekha is, in fact, a symbolic line for both husband and wife which should not be crossed by any one of them at any point of time in their worldly life. She does nothing practically, but expects a lot from God and Swamiji. She is ready to pay any amount for it rather than fighting with her husband for his adultery.-

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.

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

It is Rekha, Laxman's daughter who holds her father from forsaking his family. The name Rekha, which means a line, symbolically becomes a line of control. She plays dual role in the actual life and in the life of her father, she proves to be the line which is not to be crossed at all for her father. She plays a crucial role as a daughter to resist her father, Laxman. Priscilla's failure lies in getting familiar with only one role out of the various roles of Laxman, who is a man of multiple identities, husband, father, district magistrate. Rather than confronting with all these identities, she makes her familiar with only an identity identical to her. This Stephanie, who goes on quoting wild, too, knowingly or unknowingly had got attracted towards Priscilla. For him, initially, it's just an affair which happened accidentally. In their first meet, the prevailing consciousness had made him aware that he should not be doing that. But as time passed their Tuesday and Saturday meet became a convention. At times he even could not understand why she got attracted towards him. But still he continued this relationship to an extent that the very thought of Priscilla returning to her homeland created panic in him. He had

been so habitual of their rendezvous that he could no longer imagine even a week without Priscilla. Priscilla, for Laxman was "... consolation, she is escape, but she is more than that; she is a 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 some 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 Priscilla, with all the pleasures of sex, for her it is joy, celebration for she gives as much as she takes. For Laxman being with her and enjoying sex was a process of carnal discovery with an endless delight.

In spite of all this, Laxman decides to end this relationship. Somehow, he comes out of the dilemmatic situation, an unavoidable catastrophe. 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 holds him back from doing these things. His love for his daughter wins over his love for Priscilla. He realizes the responsibility-

Laxman succumbs to the pressure of this father-daughter relationship and its agitations; he fails to be there at kotli for their last meet, which proved fatal for Priscilla. Surprisingly the man, who loved her extremely, washed his hands off the affair when Catherine Hart, her mother, questions him. She fails to understand why her daughter was there in that 'out-of- the way place'. Laxman confirming his affair with her utters the words 'over worked, over weight and married' which she had read in Priscilla's letter again. But she fails to understand why he refuses to accept his relationship with her daughter. Both Catherine Hart and her husband are very sad at the sudden passing away of their daughter. On the contrary, the innocent Geetha prays God for her husband's continued success, especially on the day when Priscilla dies.

Priscilla's divorced parents who lived in a very complex relationship so far, come together and struggle hard to understand why anyone would want to kill their daughter. In fact, they never quite bother and understand anything regarding her when she was alive. In the novel, we find transcripts of their conversations with a historian – who seeks to explain the roots of sectarian hatred – and the Hindu community leader who stokes the flames of that same hatred. We meet the Sikh police chief who attempts to control the riots but he is also helpless towards his obligation to his duties and the duty towards his friend. He has to play both the roles mutely supporting the case as well as curtaining the name of Laxman. Lakshman, the district magistrate who finds himself caught between his emotional ties to Priscilla and his professional commitment to the police force and his duties to his family members. Thus the characters have to play number of roles helplessly which ultimately results in the complexity in human relationships.

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