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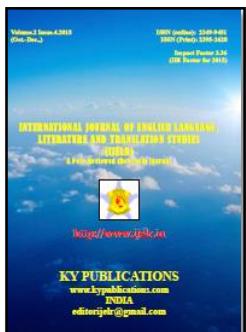
## REPRESENTATION OF CONFLICT BETWEEN THE EAST AND THE WEST THROUGH THE RELATIONSHIP OF LAKSHMAN AND PRISCILLA IN SHASHI THAROOR'S *RIOT*: A NOVEL

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### ABSTRACT



Tharoor is essentially a novelist with a difference in as much as he strives for novelty in his fiction. All his novels testify to his unique and distinct treatment of the subject-matter. A book of great moral, religious, social and political complexity, *Riot* : A Novel is a dossier of the tumultuous relationship between the East and the West represented through the characters of V. Lakshman and Priscilla Hart. On the surface Riot: A Novel appears to be a tragic story of a twenty four year old New York University doctoral candidate Priscilla Hart, visiting the small town of Zalilgarh as a volunteer with the population control organization HELP US, but a more profound insight into the novel brings out a bitter truth about a society afflicted with self-imposed banes having their roots in history and which with the passage of time have crushed the very spirit and soul of Indian ethos. In a quite unique and interesting manner, the action of the novel begins at the end with a newspaper report of the gruesome murder of the heroine, Priscilla Hart, whose stay in India was because of her fieldwork for her doctoral dissertation.

The objective of this paper is to present the conflict between the East and the West by means of the ill-fated romance between Priscilla Hart and V. Lakshman, an older married government official working as the District Magistrate. This relationship between an American woman and an Indian man brings out the conflict between two divergent cultures that have been in conflict with each other for generations and any possibility of coordination and mutual trust between the two gets thwarted because of the distinct mental make-ups of two individuals hailing from two different cultural backgrounds. What is important to note here is that the genesis and evolution of this ever-gnawing sense of distrust too stemmed from history.

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*Riot : A Novel* is a "a basic parable of the modern world, with its random human encounters, clashes of cultures and garbles international communiqés"(Goodheart Web). This novel is significant in so far as it brings together the white Europeans and the brown Indians on the same pedestal. Considering the post-colonial scenario depicted in the novel, the interaction between the Indians and the Europeans becomes all the more important. The diverse attitudes and viewpoints of those who were once colonized and of those who belong to the western world of the colonizers, though colonialism has ended a long time back, impart a new dimension and thematic strand to this novel. Thus seen, *Riot* comes out as a kind of documentary on the Indian cultural heritage and the onslaught of foreign cultures like the Islam and the Christianity on its identity. Indian socio-cultural values with all existing evils are seen from the eyes of the characters who hail from different cultures and societies. Their views and thoughts become really pertinent when seen in the context of the contemporary Indian scenario.

*Riot : A Novel* substantiates Tharoor's place as a major voice in contemporary literature not only of India but of the world. This novel is an exploration of various types of conflicts between individuals, cultures, ideologies and religions but what is significant here is that all these issues have been dwelt upon in the context of the recent history of India. The narrative of the novel is cast in the year 1989 when the Babri Masjid dispute was the talk of the town and the relations between the Hindus and the Muslims in India were far from normal. This turbulent atmosphere forms the background of the novel and Priscilla Hart, an educated modern American lady, is caught in the vortex of the simmering communal tension in a small Indian town Zalilgarh which is nothing but India in miniature. Priscilla's predicament is quite peculiar in so far as she is the only white lady not only in the organization she is working for in India but also in Zalilgarh whereby her position is like that of a minor. What makes her a minority in India is her helplessness before the inexorable circumstances with which she has to deal and in which she gets entangled. Despite being a self-dependent white lady, Priscilla appears nothing more than a puppet when seen in the context of the circumstances of her life. She becomes the victim of communalism, atleast it so appears, though there may be several other reasons behind her killing like her love affair with a married I.A.S. officer V. Lakshman and her work for the betterment of women in Indian society.

The relationship between Priscilla, a twenty four year old New York University doctoral candidate and Lakshman, a married Indian bureaucrat and also a father of a six-year-old child, foregrounds how people belonging to two distinct cultural backgrounds perceive and understand each other. The difference between the east and the west comes to the fore when seen from the perspectives of V. Lakshman and Priscilla respectively. The way they both contemplate about their own lives and their surroundings foreground a world of difference between the cultures, customs and beliefs of the countries they come from. Not only do their views bring out the distinctions between their respective mental and emotional make-ups, but also make one understand how an Indian and a European differ with each other when it comes to tackling both spiritual and worldly problems. Indians' attitude towards the Europeans has always been quite peculiar in as much as they have always regarded whites as outsiders and throughout the pages of history, this fact recurs time and again. The whites on the other hand came to the Indian subcontinent with the preconceived notions about the inferiority, and savagery of the Indians. So, right from the beginning it was evident that the two races were bound to be in a kind of love-hate relationship where hatred was more pronounced than love.

V. Lakshman and Priscilla Hart are both modern and educated but what makes them different from each-other are their respective cultures, religions and also the colours of their skins. Thus another significant aspect of the novel is the contrasting features of two cultures- Western and Eastern, Occident and Orient. Nanda Kumar in an article "Multiplicity of Voices in the Novels of ShashiTharoor" remarks:

...The conflict between Lakshman and Priscilla is the conflict between the Victorian ideals of duty, responsibility and respectability, and the Romantic credo of freedom, love and individual fulfillment. Or to put it in another way, it is the conflict between the East and the West. (Kumar Web)

Lakshman's attraction towards Priscilla is by and large because of her 'white' skin. Indian society has its own socio-cultural set-up that does not allow Indian men or women to indulge in open sex, extra-marital love affairs, or fulfillment of sexual desire before marriage but western culture is more open and liberal when it comes to

the fulfillment of carnal desires. Lakshman seems to be fascinated by the freedom provided by the western culture and also because of being sexually dissatisfied with his wife, he feels drawn towards Priscilla who too is attracted towards him despite knowing that he is married. Thus they represent the attitude of two different cultures towards love, sex and marriage in concrete and open terms.

Gita, the wife of Lakshman represents the virginity and virtuousness of an Indian woman. Lakshman tells Priscilla that Gita is a symbol of purity. Almost every husband in India wants his wife to be a virgin. But he never allows such a yardstick to appraise his own character. Duality of truth is the cause for confusions. Prostitution in India is legal in some places as sex is not simply acceptable or even widely available outside of marriage. In America, marriage is a bond between two lovers but in India, marriage is an arrangement between families, one of the means for perpetuating the social order. Tharoor opines through V. Lakshman :

The West believes that love leads to marriage, which is why so many marriages in the West end when love dies. In India we know that marriage leads to love, which is why divorce is almost unknown here, and love lives on even when the marital partner dies, because it is rooted in something fundamental in our society as well as our psyche (*Riot: A Novel* 136. Further references to this novel will appear as page numbers preceded by RAN).

V. Lakshman is one of those Indian bureaucrats who are given to western life-style but only in terms of dress and manners. Such people end up making a mess of their own lives in their desire to be one of the westerners. Such superficially westernized Indians are torn between the desire to emulate the English life-style and their inability to alienate themselves from their own cultural values. In the present novel, Tharoor suggestively explicates that for Lakshman, being associated with Priscilla, was like a dream come true. It was mainly owing to his fascination for American culture and life-style that he falls for Priscilla and not out of any genuine passion or love. He himself acknowledges:

There are moments, of course, when I too fantasize about a new life with a new wife, a new honey blond wife with skin the color of peaches-and-cream and eyes like diamonds dancing in the sunlight, and I forget, momentarily, my responsibilities, the burdens of guilt and obligation that shackle me to the present. (RAN 104)

Falling in love with an American gave him a kind of satisfaction that he found missing in his own personal life. For him, Priscilla is nothing more than a door to another fantasy. He himself voices what he feels about his passion for Priscilla:

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. (RAN 155)

The historical account of Priscilla's life and her encounter with Indians like Lakshman show how she goes through traumatic experiences first in her childhood when her father indulges in a sexual affair with an Indian woman and later when she herself falls a prey to the advances of an Indian bureaucrat. An educated American, Priscilla appears a weakling while dealing with the circumstances of her life. The intricacies of Indian socio-cultural ideals have been projected through the character of Lakshman who quite shrewdly argues his way out of his relationship with Priscilla on the pretext that his sanctimonious cultural values do not permit him to be disloyal to his wife though while being in an affair with Priscilla for past few months, he has not felt any sense of guilt. Quite pertinent are his following words:

Is it freedom I want or Priscilla? ... I'm not even sure I have the right to do that to Geetha, to abdicate my husband-hood? I didn't choose to start my marriage in the first place how can I choose to end it? My role as a husband and father is central to who I am; it concerns my rootedness in the world; it is inextricably bound up with my sense of my place in the cosmos. I have been brought up to believe that such things- marriage, family are beyond individual will, that they transcend an individual's freedom of action. (RAN 202)

What catches one's attention in the above words uttered by Lakshman is his dual personality. He hides himself beneath the shield of his socio-cultural values. There is no denying the fact that it is people like Lakshman who put a bad name to Indian social values which in their turn are meant for the well-being of man living in society.

In order to grind their own axe, people have always misinterpreted and misrepresented social customs and traditions which with the passage of time have become so much distorted and complicated that they have become useless and meaningless. Specifically speaking about Indian social set-up, marriage as an institution has been a kind of bondage for woman who has to put up with all sorts of impositions and restrictions that leaves no room for freedom, whereas on the other hand, man continues to enjoy his freedom and due to the socially accepted male-dominance, continues to be the master of household. V. Lakshman, therefore, comes out as a male chauvinist exploiting two women at the same time, namely, Priscilla who is nothing but a source of enjoyment and door of liberation for him and his wife Geetha who symbolizes a sense of security and status for him in society.

Indians are socially bonded and culturally united. Their lives revolve around family, children, job, wife and moreover their social status to the politics, politicians, governments, rulers and their romance. They are more pragmatic than romantic. The educated and intellectual professionals of India are more self-centered and confined to the selves. Lakshman is not an exception to it. In his letter to Priscilla, Lakshman confirms it: "I love you but I cannot leave my wife, my daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my wife" (RAN 239). Though there was an oscillation in his mind that Priscilla is a better replacement for Geetha, the social taboos have restricted him to leave his wife. Lakhsman is torn between two kinds of love and the prospect of two kinds of unhappiness. He chooses his love for his daughter over his love for Priscilla and the unhappiness of shattering her. That is his choice, and he must live with it. He knows neither of them is easy. His love with his daughter is more responsible than his love with Priscilla.

It is a universally-accepted that Europeans live more or less on physical plane, whereas Indians by virtue of their cultural heritage are rooted in spiritualism. However emphatic the claims of the whites may be to have understood spiritualism, they have never grasped its essence the way Indians have adopted and imbibed spiritual values in their lives and whenever Indians have aped the western life-style in terms of dress and manners, they have ended up messing up with their own lives to the point where their faith and belief in their own cultural values have dwindled.

Love and sex have differently been inferred and interpreted by Lakshman and Priscilla. They are precious to Priscilla where as they are mere enjoyment and repast to physical appetite to Lakshman. This is perceived by Priscilla only at the climax. She loved him from almost the first moment and felt nothing but certainty about him. "The sex was just a means of expressing my love, a way of giving myself to the man I loved. I'm not sure that he ever understood the difference" (RAN 242). She further adds "I wanted so much to find someone who'd help me forget Dad, someone who was as different from him as possible so that he couldn't possibly remind me of him" (RAN 79). The contemporary man has been living under tremendous pressure. He lives with a lot of compromises. He abides to the whims and fancies of his parents. The elders of the family thrust their unfulfilled desires on their children. Priscilla sums up the present state of Lakshman as "through sex he found love, and in love he found confusion, uncertainty, fear" (RAN 242). Priscilla is a substitute gratification. Hypocrisy is a way of multiplying one's personality. Lakshman has multiple personalities, and they do not match. He is a concoction of the district administrator, the passionate lover, the traditional husband and father and an ambitious writer.

A post-colonial and postmodern text, *Riot: A Novel* also shows the triumph of an orientalist over an occidentalist. Priscilla represents a culture that for centuries altogether exploited other cultural set-ups, where as the eastern culture is represented by Lakshman who stands for India's cultural values. "Further, the relationship between Indian civil servant and the American researcher leads to the perennial conflicts between the Oriental values and the Western perception of truth" (Sharma and Roy Web). Given Indian struggle for independence, the English exploited the resources of India for a long time and it was only after Indian independence that Indians got extricated from the shackles of foreign yoke. The soul and spirit of Indians were so badly crushed by the foreign rule that India still is struggling to erase the bad memories of the past. The deep-rooted wish to avenge themselves on the English has been at the heart and minds of Indian people since then. Indian historians and authors have always availed themselves of every opportunity to give expression to their anger and outrage against the exploitative British rule over India for above two centuries. They have not only

rectified the English versions of Indian history but have also shown time and again the victory of Indian people and characters over the European people or characters. The finest imaginable example of this is the Indian movie *Lagaan* in which a few illiterate villagers get together to form a cricket team against the British challenge and also defeat the latter to get their excessive taxes relaxed. Such triumphant attitude has also been shown in Indian novels in English. In *Riot*, Priscilla's exploitation by a dark-skinned bureaucrat is nothing but a kind of victory for the orientalists when seen from the post-colonial perspective. Lakshman's reverence for the west and its life-style can be viewed as a once-colonized subject's capability to equally respect himself vis-à-vis the white colonizers. Thus, Tharoor by virtue of his dexterity in characterization and handling of subject-matter emerges as a trumpeter of vindictive attitude towards the occidental colonizers of his country, condemning the fabricated and self-adopted superiority of these racial exploiters of humanity.

A profound study of the character of Priscilla provides an interesting and thought-provoking dimension to *Riot*. A feminist study of her character reveals how a woman can be the exploiter of other woman when it comes to the fulfillment of her wishes and desires. However honest Priscilla may claim to be in her endeavours to uplift the living standard of poor Indian women, she does not show any feeling of sisterhood and sympathy for Geetha with whose husband she carries on the love-affair despite knowing well that she is ruining the life of a wife and a daughter. Seen from the perspective of Geeta, Priscilla emerges as an inadvertent exploiter. She is no doubt a self-oriented white foreigner exploiting the naivety of a typical Indian woman. Proving herself to be a marginalizer of an innocuous oriental, she appears to be afflicted with the disease of superiority of the colonizers. In her desire to make Lakshman hers, she doesn't think even for a while that she is jeopardizing Geetha's matrimony. To justify the affair between herself and Lakshman, she opines that there is no love or understanding between Geetha and Lakshman whereby she proves herself to be ignorant of the psyche of an Indian woman whose world centers round her husband and her familial responsibilities.

Thus by being insensitive to Geetha, Priscilla shows herself to be the daughter of her father who too had deceived his wife by seducing Nandini. Priscilla hates her father for being disloyal to her mother but she herself does the same by playing with the emotions of Geetha. Considering how insensitive she is towards Geetha, her following words about her father appear meaningless and nonsensical:

I suppose I never forgave my father...Just seeing him...with that awful woman from his office. I was barely fifteen, and I felt personally hurt, as if it was me he'd betrayed and not my mother. (RAN 77)

Priscilla's indifference towards the emotions and feelings of Rekha, the six-year-old daughter of Lakshman and Geetha, corroborates her shallowness and selfishness. She does not seem to realize even for a moment that Rekha too might have the same feeling of hatred for her which she herself had towards Nandini. Her character in the present novel appears to corroborate a hybridity in the post-colonial society- a society which is clearly an amalgam of both its colonial and non-colonial versions in India. However, honest and committed Priscilla might claim to be in her vocation of raising the living standard of poverty-ridden and uneducated Indian women, she casts aside all moral compunctions and ethical thinking when it comes to the realization of her own wishes and desires. Therefore, she shows herself to be a white-coloured American lady with the self-avowed and self-appointed task of ameliorating the lot of the citizens of third-world countries and working for the same with the seeming fellow-feeling but beneath the garb of humanitarianism, she is a female exploiting another female. It is because of this that the words of Kipling appear true: "East is east and west is west; and never the twain shall meet." However bitter it may appear, Europeans have come to India with the self-imposed mission of civilizing Indians but all their claims prove meaningless when they succumb to their selfish interests and forget the well-being of Indian natives.

Priscilla, however well-intentioned she may be in her efforts to work for the betterment of the lives of poor Indian women, fails miserably when it comes to comprehend Indian socio-cultural ethos the essence of which has remained unchanged despite a well-pronounced change in the life-style of Indians. In India, marriage has always been a sanctified and socially approved institution that imparts meaning to one's life. Familial responsibilities and obligations that come in the wake of a matrimonial alliance between two families keeps one rooted to one's society. The sense of satisfaction and happiness one gets from being in a life-long bonding with

another person can be understood by an Indian only and is difficult to be found elsewhere. Lakshman, on the other hand, appears a product of western education who is unable to understand his own culture. The fate of an illicit and sexually driven love-affair between Priscilla and Lakshman was obvious from the very first and history is full of such examples where Indian men or women have indulged in such extra-marital affairs but ended up ruining either their own married lives or the lives of the person with whom they carry on their illicit affair. Lakshman here proves to be a deceiver of all his relationships for he not only betrays Priscilla by showing his inability to relinquish his family but also deceived his wife and daughter by getting into an extra-marital affair without in any way being pricked by his conscience. Thus in *Riot: A Novel*, Tharoor does not merely circumscribe the male chauvinism to the uneducated stratum of Zalilgarh but also underscores its wide prevalence amongst the educated and upper class of its social structure.

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