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WOMEN BATTLING FOR SURVIVAL IN CONFLICT ZONES AS SEEN IN SHASHI
THAROOR'S NOVEL 'RIOT'

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ABSTRACT

The article aims to understand how women struggled to survive amidst the pain and trauma during times of conflict. Women, in such scenarios of conflict, often become symbolic bearers of oppression and discrimination. The paper focusses on the condition of women during the post-Independence era, when they were caught up in the mesh of sectarian violence and communal conflict, which later led to the armed conflict and violence following the partition of India. Most often during times of conflict, women faced brutal atrocities and lived with fearful memories as they were afraid to voice out the injustice meted out to them. Fearing social stigmatization and rejection by family and community, they struggled within themselves. Women were vulnerable and defenceless in most conflict scenarios, and they became easy targets for the perpetrators. The paper studies on the depiction of the female characters in Shashi Tharoor's novel 'Riot' and how they faced the challenging socio-political situations during the sectarian violence and the communal conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims following the controversial Ram Janmabhoomi issue.

Keywords: Trauma, Oppression, Discrimination, Sectarian, Stigmatization, Vulnerable, Conflict.

Women are an integral part of any narrative text, as history often resound with the narratives of women. To assimilate the true spirit of a conflict zone, it is vital to understand and analyze the roles and functions of women in conflict zones. Women and children are most often the vulnerable population in a conflict zone, as they face hardships and are always at the receiving end. Women, who survived the trials and tribulations of the conflict, lived a life filled with memories of varied and terrifying experiences for the rest of their lives. They silently endured the stigma, the pains of reprisals and the fear of being socially ostracized. They survive the pain and psychological trauma as they become powerlessness and are often left with the daunting experiences of their painful past. The fear of being displaced, dislocated, and even being deprived of their basic infrastructure leaves them in a state of insecurity.

Women from the pre- historic times have been regarded and held in high esteem, as they were considered as the torch bearers of culture, identity and integrity of their community. They recreate the link of belongingness to the past and the future. Women become insecure during times of conflict, yet they manage to continue their life for the well-being of their families and their communities. Women in conflict zones, often

took up roles and responsibilities, done previously by men such as farming, grazing, taking care of the patriarchal business and so on. This pushed them to think and act beyond their traditional roles of women as the homemakers who were always busy, tending and nursing the family and the loved ones.

History proves how female protagonists were an integral part of most war narratives- be it the case of the illustrious Helen of Troy for whom the Greeks and Trojans fought; or even if it was with the Hindu epic Goddess Sita for whom Lord Rama waged a long battle with the demon Asura king Ravana. Fighting for women and for her freedom were always considered as a part of the adventure and chivalric romance in most war narratives. Never ending battles were fought for women and for the sake of upholding their dignity. But with changing times, woman became a target or an object, whom the enemy found as a suitable bait larger political motive and agenda. Today in most war narratives, women were being exploited, victimized, and being brutally attacked. Hardly do we find women fighting back and winning battles. Later, literature has opened new domains of masculine heroes, where even the villain becomes an anti-hero. Hardly do we find an anti-heroine or a she-hero reminding one of the quotes by Aldous Huxley

“I do not so much care about what the woman feels...I only care about what the woman is- what she IS- inhumanly, physiologically and materially...” (198)

The impact of conflict and its consequences are varying in the case of men and women. Conflict affects women folk to a greater extent, as there are even situations where women sacrifices their life and their comfort zones to raise and protect their families. There were instances when the woman's virginity was under scrutiny and she was questioned and scrutinized by the family members and by the society at large. However, women survived all such pain and humiliations and updated their knowledge and practical life skills for war related uses. Most often, women became easily adaptable to war, as they often transgress the pre-existing social and cultural norms, thus evoking censure from the family as well as the social circle.

Women in conflict zones were the silent victims of oppression, as they were marginalized, and even deprived of their basic rights and privileges. Sexual violence was the worst crime, which was often witnessed in conflict zones, as women were left unprotected and were considered as mere targets for the war attacks. Women were sterilized, raped and left at the mercy of the crime perpetrators. They were the objects of ridicule and it was through them that the enemy troops planned to carry on the methods of ethnic cleansing. Women were doubly marginalized and oppressed within their own spaces. Women suffered great agony and distress, as they were oppressed by their own men folk and also by the inhuman perpetrators of violence during socio-political conflicts. In most of the cases, women succumbed to changes and demonstrated signs of resilience, only to sustain their families and their children. They suffered marginalization, poverty and discrimination, and faced the pain of being displaced and dislocated.

The paper aims to analyze the life of women in conflict zone, aiming specifically to focus on the female characters in Shashi Tharoor's historical novel *Riot*. Analyzing the female characters helps to understand the pathetic state of women who felt helpless and strangled within the confines of a chauvinistic society and how they struggled to survive amidst the chaotic atmosphere of conflict. The paper focusses on the character depiction of the four powerful and poignant female characters- to understand their lives, hardships of the characters, and how they strived to recreate an identity for themselves among their conflicting situations. The paper aims to analyze the dominant female characters in the novel and to study their lives amidst their conflicting situations. The study helps to understand the conflicts and trauma undergone by these characters. The study encompasses to analyze the life of these female protagonists- their internal conflicts as well as the socio-political conflict of which they seem to be a part and parcel.

Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot* is set amidst the sectarian violence in the post -independent Indian context (1989). The novel begins with the life and untimely death of the strong female protagonist-**Priscilla Hart**, a twenty-four-year-old doctoral student who worked in Zailgarh, a remote village in North India as part of her research program. Priscilla undertook to volunteer and work for the population control in collaboration with the organization US-HELP. The story revolves around her activities as a social worker, who helped the women of Zailgarh with their grievances and their domestic issues related to health, pregnancy and birth control. The

other side of Priscilla reveals herself as a bold and endearing lover who struggled in the mesh of a passionate and erotic love affair with the District Collector Mr. Lakshman, a well settled married man who lived with his wife Geetha and daughter Rekha.

The story begins at a critical juncture of the narrative, which indicates the newspaper report of Priscilla's death who was brutally killed in the mob fury which accentuated due to the ongoing Ram Janmabhoomi issue. The sectarian disagreement and violence assumed the dimensions of an armed communal conflict between the Hindus and the Muslims. Women like Priscilla became innocent victims and later became martyrs in the communal violence. The novel is a thread woven with multiple narratives from different perspectives as the plot is narrated through newspaper reports, transcripts of interviews, scribbling from Priscilla's own scrap book and accounts from her friends and acquaintances.

Priscilla's mother **Katherine Hart** was a single mother, who divorced her husband Rudyard Hart, on grounds of an extra marital relationship that he shared with his secretary. As the story began, Katherine reached Zailgarh, and was quite devastated to find the mysterious circumstances that led to the death of her only daughter. Katherine symbolizes a hapless victim in a conflict zone, as she faces the pangs and sorrows of a helpless mother. She frantically searches the belongings of her deceased daughter to get clues relating to her daughter's mysterious and brutal murder. She had to face the trauma of losing her own family, when her husband cheated on her, and later in life when she found that she herself was a part of a highly intolerant society. When she reached India, she wondered how her daughter coped to live within such meager conditions -with dirt and squalor all around her. She felt that the condition of the dilapidated and shabby roads literally symbolized the mindset of the rustic villagers, who were filled with the venom of age-old customs. Katherine was emotionally depressed and broken hearted to hear the death of her dear daughter. The worst agony she endured was when she understood how her daughter, who even after her death, became a victim of social stigmatization. The police officers found that it was just a normal death and that Priscilla was just like any other victim, who was accidentally caught up in the outburst of the communal feud. Katherine thus becomes a helpless mother and a disturbed wife, with two estranged sons. The author narrates the pain and helplessness of Katherine the mother, who tried to unravel the mystery of her daughter's death. The ongoing socio-political conflict of the Ram Janmabhoomi issue in Zailgarh can be drawn in parallels with the ongoing personal trauma faced by Katherine, as she faced the mental conflict of having lived with an unfaithful husband and the pain of losing her daughter and her family.

Priscilla fought sincerely for the people, and particularly for the welfare of the women in Zailgarh. She fought a never-ending battle against the injustice around her and strived to assert her own identity and individuality and worked in order to promote women's rights, autonomy and liberty. Her role as a researcher was to bring about an awareness on women's health and welfare in Zailgarh. Her fight for women and their rights as seen in the novel, is more relevant in the contemporary times, as we find women even in the twenty first century fighting for their individuality and their freedom in a masochistic society. Priscilla was a strong supporter of womanhood in the chaotic atmosphere of riots among the fanatic Hindus and Muslim folk, thereby she emerges in the novel as a radical feminist and social reformer. Priscilla was also a cultural feminist, in the sense that she endorsed herself and the other women to unravel their strengths and to voice forth their decisions boldly. Priscilla found the Indian roads broken and dusty and in a pathetic state which was very much similar to the condition to the women in Zailgarh. She found them submissive, as they had to passively submit themselves as targets for the man's sensual pleasures. For women domestic chores includes cooking, cleaning, taking care of the young and the old, feeding endless mouths and be always available for their husband's sexual fervors and accepting the pregnancies happily thereafter. The age-old religious dogmas and the attitude of the orthodox fanatic men made Priscilla's job as a social worker even worse.

Priscilla in one of her letters to her friend, narrated an incident of how she helped out a rural illiterate lady named Fathima Bi. Later Fathima's husband even tried to kill Priscilla for helping out his wife with an abortion. Priscilla in her narrative reveals the ordeal of the miserable Fathima thus:

“Fatima Bi lived with her husband and seven children in a small two bedroom flat, where she cooked for her family on an open stove in a corner of the room and washed their clothes in a public tap. She obeyed and accepted every demand of her husband, only to be left visible with a bruised cheek. Fatima Bi’s husband ranted and asserted his superiority over his wife. His vented out his anger by beating her mercilessly and by shouting and abusing her: ‘I decide how my wife conducts her life’”. (160)

Priscilla however believed that he was wrong and that ‘...it was his wife’s right to have as much information, as she needed to decide how to conduct her life’. (160)

Fathima Bi was greatly influenced by Priscilla, and in one of her letters to her friend, Priscilla wrote about Fathima and how Priscilla succeeded in influencing and educating her about her rights and privileges. Fatima later became bold and started voicing for her rights:

“‘My husband, he wants lots of children.’ But rather ‘I will decide when I am ready for a child’. I want them instead of planning to arrange their teenage daughter’s marriage, to insist on sending her to high school. I want all this for them and that’s why I am here”. (170)

Priscilla’s ways of motivating and encouraging women evoked negative responses among the masochistic male members of the society. This is seen in Priscilla’s letter to her friend.

“Being forced to have babies is one form of oppression, of subjugation by men...I want these women to understand that control of bodies is a rights issue, its health issue and they can improve their health and assert their right, they will have a real future, and they will give their daughter’s a real future.”(171)

Priscilla’s ill- fated affair with the Government bureaucrat Lakshman was an outlet to the romantic sprite in her, as the robust individualist loved to enjoy her liberty in the company of Lakshman. She considered him as the only broad minded and educated person, who had his own philosophy of life in the fanatic patriarchal society of Zalilgarh. Lakshman, on the other hand, feared that he would be strangulated by the social norms and cultural conventions of his society, if he chose Priscilla as his partner in public. Moreover, he did not wish to tarnish his image as a dutiful father and as an ethical bureaucrat. The only way in which he was ready to compromise in his life was by leaving his wife Geetha, who dutifully and diligently obeyed all the whims and fancies of her husband.

Priscilla wished and longed for a life with Lakshman and pleaded to him, as she wanted him to step out of his loveless marital relationship. Priscilla’s utmost desire to reconstruct her feminine position and her struggle to reshape her identity is evident in her words to Lakshman,

“A woman who is available at your convenience, two evenings a week. You don’t have to give up anything. Your work, your social life, your family, your official commitments. You have it all, including me.” (214-15)

The author portrays a multi-dimensional picture of Priscilla, as a strong female- who on one hand, voices for her individuality and emphatically asserts her sense of freedom, love and feminism, yet on the other hand as a lover pleading to her lover to ascertain her status from a lover to a wife. She craves for a social recognition in her relationship with Lakshman and loathes herself for having an illicit affair with a married man. Priscilla regarded sex as a natural outcome of her feelings and she perceived the erotic love meetings with Lakshman as a means of expressing her love. She questioned the very nature of the marriage system in India, where two strangers met and got hooked up in marriage, where love was seen nowhere in picture. She said that such a life was just a mere contract, or a decision taken by a few elder members in the family. Priscilla was a radical feminist who noticed Lakshman, her lover as “Mr. Right in the wrong place in the wrong time”. (69)

Priscilla in the novel, emerges as an individualist who questions the very superstructure of the society, she lives in. She vehemently voiced out her anger against women facing domestic violence and other oppressions related to gender equality.

Sundari was the sister of Kadambari, one of Priscilla’s helpers and co- workers. Priscilla met Sundari for the first time in a dirty and crowded Government hospital, where she was left all alone, without having anyone to take care of her. Sundari was a beautiful young lady, who became a tragic victim of domestic violence, for her

inability to bring adequate dowry as part of her marriage agreement. She was abused and physically tortured by her husband and her mother-in-law. She was accused for bearing a baby girl, whom the male members presumed would become a doom to the family. The peak of the domestic violence and harassment reached when her husband and her cruel in-laws set her body on fire. With 75% burns in her body, Sundari survived and lived with her painful and tormenting experiences.

Taking the case of these four women characters in Shashi Tharoor's novel Riots, namely Priscilla Hart, Katherine Hart, Fathima Bi and Sundari; we find them as women suffering in various spheres. They tried to unfathom the reasons for their miserable existence and for their agonies, which made them suffer all throughout their lives. They tried to reverse their fate by voicing out their protests and by fighting for their basic rights. Their voices were often hushed and silenced by the patriarchal norms within their conflict zones.

In Priscilla's case, it was Lakshman's undue civic and social sense which made him cling on to a loveless relationship. Taking the case of Katherine, she felt that it might be her husband's monotony in their marriage and the mid-age crisis which led to the separation of her family. In Sundari's life, it was a situation where her parents could not afford the dowry demanded by the groom, that resulted in her tragic fate. She was set ablaze for bearing a baby girl and she had to suffer a great deal, even after taking care of her husband and his family in the best possible way. Fatima Bi was another victimized soul who helplessly survived the tortures imposed on her husband, for voicing her resentment against the multiple pregnancies which she had to endure and for her demand to educate her daughters.

Here women fought against the male domination and oppression imposed on them by a cruel and callous society. Priscilla fought to reclaim her identity with her lover, who refused to accept her fearing a social stigmatization. Priscilla also fought for the other women of the village, as well as for herself; Katherine, the helpless mother battles the pain of losing her only daughter and her family. Fathima Bi and Sundari were helpless characters who were tormented by episodes of domestic violence and oppression. Though they cry and shout for help; their lament is mostly unheard and goes unnoticed.

Though women were considered as the symbolic bearers of cultural and ethnic identity since times immemorial, yet they faced challenging and disturbing situations. They had to leave their comfort zone, by going to places where they were ill- equipped and had to face emotional, mental and psychological trauma. Most often women endured severe physical and mental tortures such as rapes, enforced sterilizations and forced pregnancies. They were assaulted, subjected to inhuman modes of punishment and had to endure degrading treatments. This reminds the situation faced by the two characters in the novel Fathima and Sundari who were subjected to domestic violence and subjugation amidst the violence and trauma in the conflict zones. Women suppressed their painful and humiliating experiences, as they feared that they might be reprimed by their own society and community for transgressing beyond their social and cultural restrictions.

To conclude, all the female characters in the novel were interconnected by a common link-i.e. the socio-political conflict of period. Within the conflicting grounds on the Ram Janmabhoomi issues and amidst the fanaticism of the Hindus and the Muslims, we find women fighting within the spaces of their domestic households for their rights and liberties. They were fighting their lone battles -to free themselves from the shackles of an orthodox society, reminding us of a quote from Robert Browning 's poem Andrea Del Sarto:

"Love, we are in God's hand.
How strange now, looks the life he makes us lead.
So free we seem, so fettered fast we are!
I feel he laid the fetter: let it lie!" (49-53)

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