



SIMILARITIES BETWEEN CHETAN BHAGAT'S RIYA SOMANI AND THAROOR'S PRISCILLA HART: A STUDY BASED ON THE NOVELS *RIOT* AND *HALF A GIRL FRIEND*

Dr.S.SUBRAMANIAN

Assistant Professor, Department of English, Chikkaiah Naicker College, Erode



Dr.S.SUBRAMANIAN

Article Info:01/03/2015

Revised on: 14/03/2015

Accepted on: 17/03/2015

ABSTRACT

The study is based on the works of the two most popular Indian writers. The authors are Sashi Tharoor and Chetan Bhagat. Their works titled *Riot* and *Half a Girl Friend* are taken for study and the similarities in the characteristics of the two leading characters of both the novels have been analysed. It is important to understand that very few characters are as similar as these two characters. There could be various reasons for the parallelism in the characterization of which idealization of woman in the author's mind could have brought the same features in the two unrelated characters. Priscilla Hart is an American lady and she plays the lead role in the novel *Riot* and the protagonist of *Half a girl friend* is Riya Somani, an Indian Marwari girl. Both these characters have common traits like adventurism, independent mind set, romanticism and above all same parental problems

© Copyright KY Publications

Two Indian writers of the twenty first century have made themselves great by producing works of immense weightage for varied audience. These authors not only symbolize the emergence of "New India", but also break the shackles of the Indian past with their mighty pen. The writers mentioned above are Shashi Tharoor and Chetan bhagat. Tharoor emerged as a writer even during his college days with much of his greatness spilling over during his UN tenure. He is a great columnist with his pen touching almost all the newspapers. Some of his noteworthy works that have caught the attention of the contemporary readers are "The Great Indian Novel", "Riot", and "India: From Midnight to the Millennium". He has carved some glorious characters like Priscilla Hart- the focus of our present study. Like Tharoor, Chetan Bhagat is an

interesting writer, whose "Half a Girl Friend" has hit the stands with a great impact. His few noteworthy works like "Five point someone", "One night @ the Call centre" have established a name for himself. His new angel, the inimitable Riya Somani has left a deep impression in both the young and the old.

To study the characters of these two women from different authors would be an interesting attempt, for both typify the qualities of the newly educated single woman in their respective spheres. They are synonymous with exoticism, independence, care, and almost similar familial circumstances. At same time they also differ on many aspects as a consequence of their cultural variance. Culture had planted selfishness in Priscilla and flexibility in Riya. The former was also flexible in

public sphere, but personally, she was selfish and rigid in matters relating to love, sex and marriage.

A short introduction of Priscilla Hart from Tharoor's "Riot" would reveal that she is an American lady who lands in the riot stricken town of Zalilgarh as a part of her doctoral research programme. In order to complete her field work, she was a part of the NGO Help-Us. It was an organization that focused on the population control, and she as a member took keen interest in canvassing the slum women of Zalilgarh with a great risk. In the course of her sojourn, she slips in to the bed of love with the District Magistrate in the lonely ramparts of an abandoned fort located at the outskirts of the town. Soon, the riots between the two communities engulf the whole of the town, and she becomes a victim of the same. The protagonist of this novel provides this study an effective fodder. Riya Somani of "Half a Girl Friend" is another girl that comes under this purview. She is an Indian Marwari girl who had an immense fortune. Her modernism symbolized the modern India in all possible means. This girl is introduced as a fresher in St. Stephens College along with Madhav, the protagonist of the work. She confuses the readers in terms of her love towards Madhav and unexpectedly drops out of her graduation in order to marry her cousin Rohan. This marriage flops and she ends up in a private job in Bihar, here she meets Madhav after a long gap and allows him to resume his love. Again, at the zenith of his dreams, she deserts him by faking cancer. But her personal jottings reveal the truth and Madhav proves his chivalry by hunting her in USA.

Both the ladies love exoticism in their respective spheres. They fear not the new atmosphere, but adapt themselves to the emerging situations with ease. Priscilla Hart's tryst with India proves the special quality that resides in her. Her acquaintance with India began at a very tender age during her father's employment with a multinational company in the country. Even at that age, she adapted herself to the Indian situation and even loved the culture wholly. The novel "Riot" reveals that Priscilla's interest in India was sparked during the three years of her stay along with her parents during her childhood. This is an evidence of

her adaptability in a new situation and her love for exoticism. The novel has lines of her university professor, who says,

"She was so committed, so engaged in the problems of India" (3, Riot). Something in India should have touched her chord and made her a virtual slave of this poor nation. Her ability to adapt is further endorsed by Shankar Das, the project director of HELP-US. He says, "She made friends very easily. Sometimes I am saying to her, you should be so friendly with all these people" (13, Riot). Making friends is not that easy and only people with flexibility and confidence can manage to succeed in it. Her habit of cycling through the nook and corner of the Zalilgarh town in itself is a proof of her love for exoticism. She was adventurous by nature and enjoys the cowdung sidewalks, the tin roofs, bright painted sign boards and even the red betel stains that hang on every wall. She herself confesses that,

"I wheel my bicycle in to their habits,
Tell them what's right, what can be done,
And how to do it". (15, Riot)

It is another evidence of her exotic mindset. Her view about India stands tall when compared with Randy Diggs, the reporter of New York journal who reaches Zalilgarh after the death of Priscilla to probe the incident. He complains,

"God, what a dump.

The heat. The dust. The flies. The shit. The crowds. You name it, Zalilgarh has it. Every horrific western cliché about India turns out to be true here."(17, Riot).

This complaint of Randy stands in contrast to Priscilla's love even for the minute aspects of the town. In fact, it could be boldly asserted that even her love for Lakshman was purely due to her love for exoticism. He takes her to an abandoned fort named Kotli located at the outskirts of the town. It satiates her adventurous spirit that she visited it quite often. Her final visit to the fort at the height of communal riots takes her life. It once again proves that the young blonde, blue eyed lady was bold enough to venture out even during a curfew. Thus Priscilla as a character enjoyed the exotic atmosphere and satiated her adventurous nature.

The same mindset could be noticed in Riya Somani of Chetan Bhagat's "Half girlfriend". She too

loved adventures. Her visit to the boys hostel in St. Stephens College is a proof of the same. She was unmindful of the consequences and visits "Rudra" the hostel in which Madhav stays. Her visit to hostel portrays her as a bold venturesome girl with an exotic spirit that prompted her to pursue her pursuits. Riya abandons her college studies half way to marry her cousin Rohan who had a flourishing business in London. This marriage was borne out of her venturesome spirit that had a special love for travel and learning music. She says,

" I want adventure, travel and excitement. Rohan promises all that"(88 Half Girlfriend). Is it not a proof to assert her exotic adventurous spirit that loved to measure the world? It is almost same akin to the dreams and spirit of Priscilla. Of course, both the characters wanted to marry exotic men. Lakshman was foreign to her expectations, while Rohan was a man who stayed in an exotic land for Riya. Far from this, Riya divorced her newlywed husband and joined a company in Bihar. Here too, her spirit of venture is visible, for Bihar was certainly a totally strange land with

many challenges. She boldly settles there for few months before moving out of it due to the pricking words of Madhav's mother. From Bihar, she lands in U.S.A. where she is again a stranger. Both these girls have a great spirit and they love new lands which they accept without any complaint.

Independence is a new factor for Indian women. History has been cruel towards them with suppression as a part of their day to day life. Priscilla Hart, the twenty four year old American lady in India is a highly independent character. Her individualism stands parallel to that of Riya Somani, for both the characters love independence and takes decisions based on their whims and fancies. Priscilla visited India out of her volition, and her love for the poor nation overflows its brim and almost lives her life in the Zailgarh all alone. Her abode is a simple one with minimal facilities like a table fan, a radio set and few books. He lives a contented happy life spending most of her time by riding her bicycle in to the slums of the town. She admonishes the women about the importance of birth control and their liberty. In her risky voyage, she depends on none and is highly self reliant. She meets the district

magistrate in the course of her field work to discuss the works of her NGO. It is astounding to note that the girl had the guts to perform her responsibilities without any fear. Her independent nature should have sprouted from her innate conviction. She was a person who firmly believed in her actions. Her activities relating to admonition of the poor ladies of the slum to go for abortion; her extra marital affair with Lakshman; her decision to take the district magistrate along with her to USA are all extraordinary ones with a high degree of conviction. She never worries about the future nor does she repent about the past. This trait makes her a highly independent character.

The case of Riya Somani of "Half Girl friend" is not much different. Fortune endowed her with an extraordinary charm that had the ability to shake many a minds. Her appetite for basket ball made her tall, and her excellent schooling made her a chaste English speaker. She too was a character of extraordinary independence. Her spirit of independence should have come from the game of basketball. This trait of her is more special, for she is an Indian by birth. Even during her college days, she kept away from her parents, and took her own decisions. Right from her admission to St. Stephens to her marriage to Rohan, all decision are her individual ones. Her eventual divorce coupled with her job at a private firm in Patna is a highly independent decision. Riya is a decisive personality and does not confer with anyone for her decisions. After her divorce, she does not accept her father's money and fully believes in individual earning. Her flight to USA from the dusty towns of Bihar is an individualistic decision. Her decision to become a singer in U.S.A. in itself is a proof of her independent traits.

Regarding generosity and condescension, both Priscilla and Riya stand almost on the same plane. The former descends from a wealthy nation, while the latter hails from a very rich family. But, despite their strengths, both the girls are considerate towards others. The girl from America treats everyone with great respect and consideration. Her treatment of the uneducated women of the town is extraordinary. Her behavior towards her Indian colleagues is also generous. She

behaves well with Shankardas and Kadambari. Her treatment of rich and powerful is almost on par with her treatment of poor and weak. Her colleague Shankar Das terms her as a friendly person who never differentiated between the so called high class and low class people. He says,

“ Sometimes I am saying to her, you should not be so friendly with all these people. Some of these people not your type. Not your type. And she is laughing and saying, Mr.Das, what is my type, please? Everyone is my type. And I am saying to her, no, you should be choosing more carefully you know, avoid some of these low class riff-raff. And she is laughing again and saying, oh Mr.Das, are we all high-class riff raff here, then? Laughing and saying.”

This temperament of hers stands in parallel with Riya Somani. The latter may not be a service minded one like the former, but certainly is a simple considerate one who treats everyone with magnanimity. Her behavior towards village born Madhav Jha is extraordinary. She treats him as her equal, and encourages and helps him to learn English. Her invitation for her birthday party, and the subsequent treatment at her house shows her real character. She is a generous, broadminded and a loveable character like Priscilla Hart.

The similarities are not only in their characteristics, but their parents were more or less similar in their behavior. Priscilla's father was a pervert known for his illicit relationships. His extra marital affair with a lady by name Nandini affected Priscilla very much. She almost saw her father's misdeed, and the author has almost pictured her reaction in the following lines,

“she didn't scream. She didn't slam the door. She didn't runaway. Instead, she just stood there, her baby blue eyes widening in bewilderment and hurt” (RIOT 41).

Somani, father of Riya is almost same, or even worse than the former. He was a business tycoon who was extremely perverse. He was an ugly father who ravished his own daughter at a tender age. Riya's journal reveals her father's darker side in the following manner. She says,

“They say I am so quiet. Silent Riya. Mysterious Riya. Shy Riya.

I don't answer them. All I want to say is, if you crush a flower before it blooms, will it ever bloom as bright later?

He hasn't touched me for the last three years. He dares not” (HALF A GIRL FRIEND, 197)

The fathers of both the girls are sexually abnormal, and mentally immoral. They embody selfishness and cruelty. But both Priscilla and Riya are silent and do not reveal their paternal misdeeds to their mothers. The silences of both the characters show their strength and resilience.

Close to the above mentioned parallels come the activities of the two girls. Priscilla uses her scrapbook to unravel her inner feelings, while Riya does the same through her journals. The former's scrapbook has a mine of details regarding her amorous affair with the DM of Zalilgarh, Lakshman. The latter's journal reveals her from childhood to the post marital catastrophe.

Thus similarities between two different characters of two different novelists are not usual things in the literary world. But here, it could be due to the western cultural intrusion in the oriental life. Moreover today's writers use different pens to write the same story So, the characters are more or less same even though they have different names. But still the similarities are sweet and colourful.

REFERENCES

- Tharoor, Shashi. *Riot*. Noida: Penguin, 2003. Print.
- Bhagat, Chetan. *Half Girlfriend*. New Delhi: Rupa, 2014. Print.
- Bandopadhyaya, Sweety. “Ghettoization of Identity: Paradigms of Violence in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*.” *Points of View* 18.1 (Sum 2011): 84-89
- Haider, Nishat. “ Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*: a novel about the construction of identity, the nature of truth, re-presenting and the ownership of history.” *ASouth Asian Review* 27.2 (2006): 235-260.