



## Postcolonial Traits in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

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### Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel* is one of the most famous literary works. It marks identical postcolonial features such as encounters a veritable riot of ideas, beliefs, mood, styles and perspectives that merge into a larger rubric stretching across two antipodal, culturally disparate continents, individuals and predicaments. The present paper is an attempt to highlight post-colonial traits in Tharoor's *Riot: A Novel*

Key words: cross culturalism, intertextuality, communal, politics, imperialism.

The term "Post-colonialism" deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies. It refers to 'reading and writing practices stuck in some form of colonial experience occurring outside Europe as a consequence of European expansion into the exploitation of 'the other worlds'. According to Hutcheon "Post-colonialism is the need in countries which have been victims of imperialism, to achieve an identity, 'uncontaminated by Universalist or Eurocentric concepts and images'"<sup>1</sup> (qtd.in Hutcheon, 1989:171). The post-colonial discourses focus on cultural production in the attainment of that goal. They further seek to counter, with varying degrees of success, neo-imperialistic strategies in the political, economic and cultural spheres. As Annamaria Carusi puts it: 'Post-colonialism lays itself open to a decolonization by its very dependence on the notion of the subject as a humanist subject and therefore inherits the limitations of the imperialist subject'"<sup>2</sup> (Carusi, Annamaria, 1989:84). Though post-colonial countries have become politically decolonized, their discourse is in continued subjection to cultural and epistemic imperialism.

In *Riot: A Novel* Tharoor addresses innumerable concerns and issues confronting contemporary India. Unfolding complex questions about the personal, social and communal politics of the typical small town of Zalilgarh in Northern India in 1989. It is the story of a twenty-four years old New York University doctoral candidate Priscilla Hart, visiting the small town as volunteer with the population control organization HELP-US. Her commitment to help the local women and her passionate affair with the district Magistrate Lakshman, followed by her untimely and mysterious death. A few days after her murder, her parents Katharine and Rudyard Hart visit India together in search of answers to their queries regarding their daughter's mysterious and sudden end. However, despite their sincere and consistent efforts, the Harts are forced to return unsatisfied simply because of surmising that Priscilla's fatal end had many deliberate and political reasons behind it such as the local resentment against her work and her clandestine affair with the married District Magistrate of the town.

The novel begins with the series of 'spoof columns' in the New York Times, reporting the murder of an American girl Priscilla Hart in the North Indian town of Zalilgarh, to be followed by excerpts from personal diaries, letters, journals and interviews. It compares and contrasts the occidental and oriental societies rekindling the memories of a colonized India. Juxtaposing the blacks' and the 'whites' belonging to the contemporary postcolonial times in the novel, The novelist effectively portrays the divergent attitudes and thought processes of not only those once colonized but also of the people belonging to the western world of the colonizers decades after the end of colonialism. These two societies and cultures (colonizers and colonized) are symbolize through Priscilla and V.Lakshman.

Shashi Tharoor explicates that for this dark-skinned Indian bureaucrat, the white skinned beloved was actually 'a fantasy come true' (p.155). Lakshman's closeness with Priscilla did not simply harbor on his passion for her, but also provided him with a satisfaction of being associated with an 'American' a westerner unquestionably for better than the Indians, including his wife and family. This eulogizing attitude is evidenced in his perception of the West. It is clearly portrayed him as an Indian who readily accepts the secondary status of a 'Third World' citizen. According to Spivak this easy accession to a peripheral citizenship of the world by people like Lakshman, indicts them as inadvertent creators of their own colonizers who in turn are intoxicated by the false illusions of their superiority. Displaying the shallowness of his personality bereft of concern and respect for his family, his job and his nation, he evaluates his affair with her as an avenue to a life in America. He avers: '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' ( p.155) .Thus representing the avidity of an educated, suave, refined yet complex ridden man, who courageously infringes all the confines of morality by gauging love as a vehicle of entertainment. Here Lakshman appears as the decent and dignified villain in the novel.

Priscilla the protagonist exploits Geetha's innocence, her coyness and her silent yet mature

acceptance of life more so a psychological victim of her father illicit relations leading to divorce that dispersed her family. Her life itself evolved into a paradox when she involved herself with a married bureaucrat having a six-year-old daughter. Unable to forget the past and forgive her father she expressed her feeling before Lakshman:

" 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. " (77)

Ironically however, she does not seem to realize that Rekha, Lakshman's daughter is another little Priscilla Hart in making, and probably she is another awful girl. Therefore, exhibiting a self-oriented decadence and deliberately avoiding questions regarding her personal and professional scruples, she could neither cease herself from exploitation Geetha by taking her for granted, nor could understand with her and Rekha, victim of circumstances which had tarnished Priscilla's life itself long ago. She thus appears to corroborate a hybridity in the postcolonial society- a society which is clearly amalgam of both its colonial as well as its non-colonial versions in India. Therefore, the novel is postcolonial text.

Randy Diggs, an American correspondent for the Newyork Journal comes to visit India to gather details about Priscilla's mysterious death. He plays the role of a spectator. He could not escape his feeling of superiority and perceived India and her people as the hopeless Third World destined to have a degenerated and servile existence. He remarks: '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' (p.17). This quotation reflects prejudiced perception of Westerners about India. Aijaz Ahmed's observations regarding it as 'the transhistorical and commutative nuances of colonialism'.<sup>3</sup>(Ahmed Aijaz 9)

Reinforcing Homi K. Bhaba's concept of 'Fixity' inevitably giving an immature, weak, effeminate, emotional and primitive description of the erstwhile colonies, Ramcharan Gupta openly

indicate Diggs and the Western media for its sadistic tendencies and says:

“You foreign journalists and photographers who cover India are only interested in the kind of India you want to see. The horrible dark India of killing and riots, like this riots that you are so interested in, of course: It is all of a piece with the stories of poverty and disease, of the widows of Banaras, the caste system and the untouchables, poor people selling their blood or their kidneys, the slums of Calcutta or Bombay, brides being burned for not having brought enough dowry-how many such stories have you written for your American readers, Mr.Diggs? Of course it is even better if the bad things about India are being set right by kind white Christmas- Mother Teresa is a real favourite of yours”...(212).

His remonstrance clarifies that all the so called ‘clichés’ about India, mentioned by Diggs while describing Zailgarh. Describing Gupta-Diggs encounter, that presents a citizen of the Third World as an accuser of the first world for consistently endeavoring to reduce the former.

The novelist alludes to the post-colonial outgrowth of colonialism termed as ‘Neo-colonialism’ by discussing the issue of Coca-colisation in the persons of Rudyard Kipling and his colleagues in Coca-Cola in India in 1977, found the political trepidations due to the presence of coke in the Indian markets as ‘absurd’. George Fernandes perceived the saturation of the Indian economy by America as an economic exploitation of his country. This coca-colisation of the markets of the recently liberation was perceived by socialists like Fernandes, as another occident effort to dominate, restructure and gain authority over the subcontinent. Thus, the Western effort to gain dominance over the East through economic colonization is clearly manifest. The novel is a brilliant exemplification of a ‘pluralistic text’. Tharoor has explicitly fulfilled his commitment to do something new each line. ‘I have always believed that the word ‘novel’ implies that there must be something “new’ about each one”<sup>4</sup> (Chowdhury Sandip Roy: 2001).

The novel is fictional critique representing the communal unrest of the Indian society. He highlights it in the wake of Ramjanmabhoomi Babri Masjid issue. He gives an unbiased expression to the feelings of both the Hindus and the Muslims by representing the opinions of the former through Ram Charan Gupta, a leader and religious activist and the later through Prof. Sarwar, a reader of the History Department of Delhi University. Ram Charan Gupta had led the procession in Zailgarh on the day the riot broke out in 1989. He justifies the increase in Hindu fundamentalism by quoting innumerable insistence from the past and Prof.Sarwar outlandishly, ironically negating historical facts, so as to prove himself. The novel presents India on the verge of another imminent division. The author holds Indian politician are responsible for such a state of affairs. Ram Charan Gupta comments ‘They are all atheists and communists in power in our country, people who have lost their roots. They forget that the English have left. It was English law they upheld not Indian justice... (p.53). Thus, Tharoor highlight the art of colonizing from the British.

The author presents the novel as ‘Barthian text’ with a multiagency rather than as a work with a deep meaning effectively representing the transcended values and principles essential to the nature of man. It establishes the mortality of man but the immorality of his views and inventions. In fact, this continuity of thought and the existence of the past in the present is evidenced in the myriad historical references discussed by Gupta and Prof.Sarwar in the novel. At the same time Lakshman’s comments about India, her culture, her religious pluralism and her secularism, provide an opinion about the subcontinent, divorced from that of the fundamentalist characters. Thus, Tharoor has employed multi-perspectivization and challenges history’s claim to be globally valid as a metanarratives’ and presents the novel as ‘built-in critique of historiography. Susan G. Cole comments ‘Riot is really about the construction of identity and memory, as there is never really one history, just different perspectives of the past’<sup>5</sup>. (Cole Susan G: 2005)

Tharoor adopts an 'eclectic mode of writing and envisages a wide variety of devices. He meticulously foregrounds the dimensions of multiperspectisation and inconclusiveness. He opposes to the linear construction of conventionalizing texts. It is essentially a collage of journalistic reports, diary, entries, letters, memoirs, excerpts from scrapbooks and journals, newspaper clippings, interviews, even poems written by the characters and conversations overhead. Conspicuous by its absence of a normative linearity of flow, the novel envisages a plethora of small discursive narratives, each having its own story. Thus, the elements of 'hybridity' is emphasized.

Thus, the fiction is not only an unequivocal illustration of the subtle yet powerful reminders of the subcontinents' colonial past afflicting its present, but is also an emphatic enunciation of the opulence with which he utilizes post-colonial tenets in his fictions thematically.

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