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A STUDY OF MAN-WOMAN RELATIONSHIP IN SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT

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ABSTRACT

This paper is an attempt to study man-woman relationship in Shashi Tharoor's Riot-A Novel Man-woman relationship is perhaps the most important human relationship. Literature of all lands and people celebrate this relationship which has an important bearing on conjugal life, filial love, domestic peace, family integration and social harmony. In Riot Shashi Tharoor sees man-woman relationship within the ambit of marriage- the relationship between husband and wife traditionally base on mutual love, sexual gratification, procreation, family life, social interaction and cultural continuity. The traditional man-woman relationship starts with marriage and ends with death or divorce. Man-woman relationship outside marriage has no social sanction and is looked down upon by the society. Therefore such relationships are carried on in secrecy and seclusion. Mr Sudhir, an executive in a multinational firm and family friend of V. Lakashman, has lost the respect of his family and friends because he has abandoned his beautiful wife, lovely children and a wonderful home to pursue his lust and started living with a wonderful woman herself a divorcee. Tharoor is deeply involved in the exploitation of illusion and reality concerning the traditional man-woman relationship. Outwardly husband and wife appear to be engrossed in interpersonal relationship based on equality and mutual love and trust but inwardly this relationship is marred by the male ego which seeks to marginalise the role of woman and subject Sita to agnipariksha. He makes it oblivious that male domination is not only an Indian phenomenon but also an intercultural phenomenon

KEY -WORDS: Sexual Gratification, Procreation, mutual love, exploitation, intercultural

INTRODUCTION

An author, politician, and former international civil servant, Shashi Tharoor straddles several worlds of experience. Currently a second-term Lok Sabha MP representing the Thiruvananthapuram constituency and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, he has previously served as Minister of State for Human Resource Development and Minister of State for External Affairs in the Government of India. During his nearly three-decade long prior career at the United Nations, he served as a supporter of peace, refugee worker, and administrator at the highest levels, serving as Under-Secretary General during Kofi Annan's leadership of the organization. Dr. Tharoor is an award-winning author of both fiction as well as non-fiction. In 1998, the World Economic Forum in Davos named him a "Global Leader of Tomorrow". He is also a recipient of several awards that include a Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, India's highest honour for overseas nationals. In 2012, the King of Spain awarded him the Encomienda de la Real Order Espanola de Carlos III. Among numerous other awards are one for "New Age Politician of the Year" from NDTV, the Hakim Khan Sur Award for National Integration, and the Priyadarshini Award for Excellence in Diplomacy. Tharoor's renowned first novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) brings out parallel study between characters of the Mahabharata and the Indian political leaders. His second novel *Show Business* (1992) satirises the paradoxes in Bollywood film industry. It is also about a more trenchant indictment of corruption in Indian public life. Posting the novel *Riot* amidst the morbid sectarian clashes in 1989 in North India, Shashi Tharoor explores not only man-woman relationship but socio-cultural issues, women subjugation and the cultural diversity in Native India as well.

Man-woman relationship is perhaps the most important human relationship. Literature of all lands and people celebrate this relationship which has an important bearing on conjugal life, filial love, domestic peace, family integration and social harmony. Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001) presents an interesting study of Rudyard's relationship with Katherine Hart and Nadini and V. Lakashman's relationship with Geetha and Priscilla Hart. Besides events concerning Sudhir and his wife, Rupesh and Sundari, Ali and Fatima Bi are also concerned with certain vital aspects of this relationship. The cases of Sita and Shahbano are also referred to in this respect. Moreover this relationship is the main concern of Priscilla Hart, the protagonist in this novel, who herself being a victim of her parents loveless marriage? And her father's extra-marital relationship sets her eyes on the real issues concerning it.

Priscilla Hart is well aware of the fact that man-woman relationship is based on women's subjugation to man. This is particularly apparent in India where a woman performs all drudgery, submits to the demand and blows of her husband and becomes a child-bearing and child-rearing machine. Fatima Bi has seven kids but her husband Ali, a government employee, refuses to let her use any protection. He considers his kids a testament to his virility and beats Fatima Bi up when she demands safe sex and gets her eighth pregnancy terminated. When Priscilla Hart intervenes on behalf of HELP-US population control awareness project, he tells her categorically: "I decide how my wife conducts herself... not her! And certainly not you"

In *Riot* Shashi Tharoor sees man-woman relationship within the ambit of marriage- the relationship between husband and wife traditionally base on mutual love, sexual gratification, procreation, family life, social interaction and cultural continuity. The traditional man-woman relationship starts with marriage and ends with death or divorce. Man-woman relationship outside marriage has no social sanction and is looked down upon by

the society. Therefore such relationships are carried on in secrecy and seclusion. Mr Sudhir, an executive in a multinational firm and family friend of V.Lakashman, has lost the respect of his family and friends because he has abandoned his beautiful wife, lovely children and a wonderful home to pursue his lust and started living with a wonderful woman herself a divorcee.

Tharoor is deeply involved in the exploitation of illusion and reality concerning the traditional man-woman relationship. Outwardly husband and wife appear to be engrossed in interpersonal relationship based on equality and mutual love and trust but inwardly this relationship is marred by the male ego which seeks to marginalise the role of woman and subject *Sita to agnipariksha*. He makes it oblivious that male domination is not only an Indian phenomenon but also an intercultural phenomenon. Both Geetha of India and Katherine Hart of the USA are not their husbands' equal and honoured partners but second persons of secondary importance, parasites. They are taken for granted. They have no individuality, no say in their own affairs.

The relationship between Rudyard and Katherine speaks at length about male domination. In her twenty-year long married life she has suffered subordination despite being a working woman. Rudyard keeps his wife's travel documents- her passport, ticket even boarding card- with him while travelling as he is the master of the house. She has to resign to his determination to have the aisle seat, she reads newspaper only when he finishes it and passes it to her; and she has to see the look of irritated long suffering on his face whenever she asks him to do something. Rudyard tells Randy Diggs: "I had always had my own way in the marriage- about what we'd do, where we'd do it, when, how, Katherine had always argued and always given in".(35) Her growing resentments make her less and less appealing to him. Besides her middle class values, her moderation in all things bored him. They make love less and less but sex was missing in their love making. Katherine does not even seem to miss it. As Katherine who is two year older than Rudyard grows in age, he drifts away from her and their marriage settles into a rut.

Lakshman's relationship with Geetha resembles that of Rudyard and Katherine in many respects. Lakshman calls Geetha "my wife of nine loveless years"(155). She is not so important to him as his wife as she is as the mother of his beloved daughter, Rekha. He admits that he had never really known the pleasure of sex in making love to her. Even in the wedding night Geetha was horrified at the idea of sex. To her it was something disgusting to disrobe herself completely. She showed no desire for his body. So he was disappointed. He writes in his journal "until Priscilla I had never really known the pleasure of sex. Geetha lies stiffly, unmoving as I go about what she sees my business, she neither irritates, nor welcomes, making it clear that she understands her amatory role as being to endure rather than to enjoy. She is not one for more foreplay, and she is often still dry when I enter her....when it is over I move quickly off her, lightened by no great sense of satiation. She turns away from me duty done. Not surprisingly, we make love less and less frequently"(156). After meeting Priscilla, Lakshman has slept with Geetha only once but neither of them misses it.

The question naturally arises at this point why husband and wife are cooled in their attention to each other. Why man often has his mind and heart over and above his spouse, children and family. The psychologists and the sociologists argue that men are naturally polygamous, women not. When a woman's desire for a loving mate, for motherhood, children and a home are met, she does not need anything more. Men basically do not share these feelings and continue by nature to seek variety in conquest. But Rabindernath Tagore offers a different interpretation in this context: "women are of two kinds, the mother-kind and the beloved-kind. The mother is the

rainy season. She brings the gift of water and of fruit, tampers the heat and dissolving from the heights drives away the drought. She fills with plenty. The beloved, on the other hand, is the spring, deep its mystery, sweet its enchantment. Its restlessness rocks the blood into waves of ecstasy and swings over into the jewel-chamber of the mind where the solitary string of the golden *vina* is lying mute, waiting for the vibration to set the body and mind ringing in some wordless melody.” (Tagore 1945:7)

Tagore explains that man draws strength from the mother in women and inspiration from the sweetheart in her. He needs one and desires the other. Where the two do not meet in the same person – his wife, his heart is torn into two and he is faced with a problem to which society offers no solution. This eternal longing of man for both the mother and sweetheart combined with inability of many women to offer both brings in eternal conflict in man-woman relationship and makes men “self-seekers” often drifting towards extra-marital relationship.

In the light of the above interpretation, it is quite easy to see that both Katherine and Geetha fail to be the sweethearts of their men. They are satisfied with their chores and, like Tagore’s women; they suppress many a claim of their hearts and remain committed. But they are not intimate and passionate and do not offer solicitude of a feminine touch which imparts grace and charm to man’s comfort. They seek comfort and fulfilment in different diversions – Katherine spends time in the library and Geetha visits the temple of Lord Shiva. Even after discovering the adultery of their husbands, they do not try to reclaim them by their love, romance and concern. While Katherine thinks of divorce. Geetha consults the Swami of the Shiva temple for divine help at her father’s expenses.

The extra-marital relationship of Rudyard with Nandini and Lakshman with Priscilla Hart may be seen as attempts on their parts to escape from their loveless marriage into the pleasant company of the exotic women. Rudyard, a Yankee, is completely smitten by Nandini, a convent educated Indian woman in gorgeous saris and sleeveless blouses, savouring foreign culture. He tells Randy, “what a garment Randy! There is not another outfit in the world that balances better the twin feminine urges to conceal and reveal. It outlines the women’s shape but hides the faults, a skirt can’t- under a sari a heavy behind, unfaltering legs are invisible. But it also reveals the midriff, a part of the anatomy most western women hide all the time. I was mesmerized”(38). He derives intense sexual pleasure while making love to her because at that moment her surrender was total and for him that was all that mattered. He commits adultery on the bed in which his wife would sleep with her back towards him. With Nandini in that bed, he feels to have reclaimed the conjugal bed for rightful purpose. He takes her not in a missionary position’-the man lying on the top and the woman on her back beneath- but in a doggy style-she kneeling on bed on all fours and he slapping her ample behind like a cowboy taming a mare- which marks the subjugation of woman by man. That is why Priscilla who had seen her father with Nandini has never allowed it to happen to her in bed. She tells Lakshman “ I have never let anyone make love to me the way my father was doing it with that woman from behind”(85)

Lakshman’s relationship with Priscilla takes almost the same course. To him ‘she is an incurable romantic’ girl in jeans. She is a match to him and only person in Zalilgarh he can talk to. She has read the same books, seen the same movies, and heard the same music. So they are drawn to each other first because of intellectual needs and then the physical needs. When Lakshman makes sexual advances to her, she reciprocates and let herself be loved. But Lakshman’s love for her is not real love which comes only from commitment of marriage and the experiences of sharing life’s challenges together. It is instead love as he has read of it in Western books or seen in Western

movies, an individual attraction between man and woman, a feeling that is independent of social context and familial connections. So she is quite comfortable with her western culture.

What is most satisfying to Lakshman in this relationship is the extraordinary sexual pleasure that he derives from her. "I let myself into her and my spirit slips into her soul, I feel myself taking her like nothing else I have ever possessed"(104). In her company, he forgets all his botheration. To him "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"(155). When he is with her, he is in a constant state of exhilaration. With her he has complete freedom; from her he has complete cooperation. To him "sex with Priscilla is joy, it is celebration; she gives as much as she takes... she is willing to try everything, and I find myself doing things I had only read about in books, only imagined in the day dreams of a masturbatory adolescence"(156). But Priscilla has set her heart on him. She wants him to leave his wife and marry her. At one time Lakshman thinks of abandoning all his responsibilities for the sake of Priscilla as she means so much to him that everything else pales in comparison. But soon he realises that he will be simply uprooted and suffer alienation after leaving his family. Moreover, he knows from Priscilla how her father's extra-marital relationship had offended her deeply and she had never forgiven him for his betrayal. It is ironical that Priscilla hates her father for betraying her mother, but she does not mind Lakshman betraying his wife; she had herself lived with her mother after her parents' divorce, but she wants Lakshman to take Rekha away from Geetha. Lakshman, however, cannot let it happen to his daughter. He ends up conquering Priscilla in the manner of her father when, in his last meeting with her, he gets her on her knees on the mat beneath him and takes her from behind. Tharoor describes his conquest in the following words:

He is transported by his conquests as he watches her in the mirror and beneath him, the curve of her back vividly stretched in her submission, his hands on the soft flesh below her hips as he drives home his message of need and possession. He remembers that this is not supposed to happen, that this is the one thing she will not do, but he has not asked and she has not resisted.(225)

This is what generally happens in man-woman relationship- 'the man does not ask and the woman does not resist.' Priscilla's solitary tear dropping down her love-saddened face marks the acceptance of the inevitable call it male ego or feminine frailty. Tharoor here makes it apparent that this applies to all men and women. This is the cultural phenomenon and "we are biologically formed to be cultural animals" (Green 1968:44). And this trend in man-woman relationship is likely to continue if Priscilla's murder possibly by Ali is an indication, that Priscilla who was working for the empowerment of women to enable them to resist their own subjugation by man.

Thus the real issues concerning man-woman relationship in *Riot* are male domination and female subjugation which are self-perpetuating. Even divorce between Rudyard and Katherine does not bring any substantial change in their relationships. She regains her right to be herself. But when she objects to Randy Digg's travelling to Zalilgarh, Rudyard brushes her aside. When Rudyard breaks down while watching the photograph of Priscilla and start crying, Katherine holds his head against her ribs and consoles him. In the end of the visit Rudyard says 'Sorry' to Katherine confessing that "with Nandini, I saw an opportunity, not a lover. I took what I could and left"(263). This marks his return to Katherine at his convenience and makes it obvious that loyalty in man-woman relationship remains one way- from the woman to the man. The balance is always tilted in the favour of man who may be loyal or disloyal at his convenience. Despite giving her best, a woman cannot count on man's support but on her own ability. It is for this reason that Shashi Tharoor is all for the empowerment of women everywhere,

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