



## FAMILY CRISIS AND RESILIENCE IN SHASHI THAROOR'S *RIOT*

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### Abstract

This article aims to explore the theme of "Family Crisis and Resilience in Shashi Tharoor's novel, *Riot*. The novel is a powerful documentation of communal riot that torn apart the very democratic fabric of Indian society. But the author succinctly documents how crisis affects peace and harmony of a family and how the crisis is resolved by the resilient characters. This paper also analyses how crisis crush family circles and how the member of the affected families manage such down beat times in life. Important words: riot, crisis, resilience, down beat.

Crisis is an integral part of lives around the world. Many negative and traumatic events come about every now and then leading individuals to emotionally stressful times in life. Unable to cope with such testing times, many fragile hearts tumble and crumble, and finally get collapsed forever. However, there are persons who brave those hostile times with courage and resilience. They resist and overcome such overwhelming experiences and restart a more purposeful life. If crisis causes destruction, resilience helps people to maintain balance and develops mechanisms for protection. Many great works of literature, especially novels, through many devastating conflicts teach humanity to withstand and recover from any hardships that may come their way. Shashi Tharoor, in his novel, '*Riot*', succinctly documents how crisis affects families and how resilient characters manage to overcome such traumatic experiences. The present paper endeavors to analyze how crisis crush family circles and how the members of the affected families manage such downbeat times in life.

*Riot* is a powerful documentation of the unprecedented political crisis associated with the conflict related to Babri Masjid. It also records the communal tensions that torn apart the very democratic fabric of India. The novel sheds light on the disastrous historical events that resulted in communal disharmony. The unprecedented events caused havocs even in the lives of many individuals. Tharoor, in his *Riot* effectively mixed the social unrest with the uneasy qualms in families in India.

The novel revolves around the life and death of Priscilla Hart, a 24 year old American Research Scholar who comes to India for field research in a small North Indian town called Zaligarh. The novel opens with reports of the death of Priscilla Hart through newspaper cutting. It was reported that she was killed by a rioting mob in a town where she went as a volunteer. She was killed just a few days before her planned return to her home in America.

On hearing the news of Priscilla's death, her parents, Rudyard Hart and Katherine, come again to India on a mission to unriddle the

mystery behind the untimely death of their daughter. Rudyard Hart and Katherine are not strangers to India. They were in India and led a happy life. They came to India as a family but returned to their homeland as divorcees. Rudyard's relationship with another Indian woman forced Katherine to part her ways with him. Katherine and her daughter Priscilla decided to choose their own ways. Priscilla's Indian connection continued when she returned as a volunteer to a town in India where she became a victim of the religious unrest. As parents, Rudyard Hart and Katherine want to know why their daughter was killed by a fanatic in India.

The family that Tharoor presented in *Riot* is the family of this American couple. The political and religious events in India destroyed many families including the happy family of Rudyard. The words of Katherine in her diary about her visit to India with her divorced husband on a plane throw thought provoking lights on the crisis that dismantled their family. She wrote, "We are again on a plane, Rudyard and me together, not husband and wife, merely father and mother." (7) Rudyard's indifferent attitude towards the loss of Priscilla clearly delineates how social unrest affects even a father's love for his daughter. Rudyard, the father was just trying to focus on the page, mourning the daughter whose loss did not affect him because he had lost her when she lost him, lost her while she was still living.

Family can be described as a minimal social group made up of parents and their children and it is made stronger through love, care, and loyalty. The family bond is further strengthened through emotional and moral support rendered by the parents. Though there come many matters that cause ripples in families, certain social and cultural factors play vital roles by formatting stronger bonds between individuals, and prevent families from disintegrating. Indian culture instills in us the powers of perseverance and tolerance that gives the individuals the courage and resilience to face any crisis that may come their way. The

novel proves how Indian women try to keep their families intact even in the face of grave misstates by their partners, and how Katherine, an American, hurriedly parted ways with her husband and decided to face her life alone. As a wife, she was right in her decision, but as a mother she failed miserably.

A look into the life of the American couple will delineate how culture makes one resilient when one encounters a crisis in life. In his letter to Randy Diggs, Rudyard Hart detailed the factors that caused the cataclysm of his family. He wrote that he was born of an American parent when they had been to India as Missionaries. He was named Rudyard in honor of Rudyard Kipling. Soon after his birth, his parents moved to China. Right from his childhood he had heard so much about the historical places in India. An opportunity came his way when he was appointed as a Marketing Director of Coco-Cola Company for India in 1976. He got married and thought that it was a great opportunity for him to visit India with his family. But, his wife Katherine was against the idea but finally gave her consent for a life in India. Rudyard came to India thinking about the possible happier and successful days in this new dream land. But he had no idea about the political factors that will change his life forever. Soon after his arrival in India, Kisan Mehta, the head of the Coke plant India, told him about the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act passed in 1973 by the Indian government. This Act governs the activities of all companies involved in international trade and makes it mandatory for the foreign companies to apply for re-registration and get government's approval. Moreover, there are allegation by Members of Parliament accusing Coke of looting the country and "destroying the health of Indians" (31). George Fernandes, as a parliamentarian, emphasized the importance of water as "India, where you can get coke in the cities but not clean drinking water in the villages" (31). When Janata Party came to power, Fernandes, as the Minister for Industry, ordered the company to release the secret formula to the authorities in

India. The tussle between the company and the government continued and finally the long pending application of coke was rejected, and the company was ordered to wind up its business in India. This came as a hell of a blow to Rudyard. He left his homeland with dreams of fresh and happy life in India, his dreamland. He uprooted his American home to get rooted and settled down in India. But the unexpected development forced him to think of returning to America. Katherine opposed the very idea of life in India. She came to India against her will. Rudyard was so upset that he could not even think of leaving India. He was forced some other means to extend his stay. Fortunately, his wife Katherine managed a job as a teacher at the American International School. With his eldest son Kim in final year in the school and his daughter Priscilla in her adolescence, Rudyard started looking for possibilities for a new lease of life for Coke in India. He tried his best to resume the sales of coke in India. But the company's principle did not permit him to accomplish his new found mission. He remembers the phrase "coke is a product avidly sought by countries around the world. We should not dilute our own prestige by bending over backwards to accommodate every unreasonable demand of every intransigent government" (35).

His son Kim is in his final years. So he decides to stay on in India till the end of Kim's education. Meanwhile he finds other ways to occupy his time. So he begins an affair with his secretary named Nandhini. Rudyard admits his mistakes but gives reason for that. He is not comfortable with his wife, Katherine. There are differences and resentments. She is not appealing to him. He is fed up with her American middle class mind set, poor sense of clothing, and her moderation in all things. But Nandhini is exotic to him. She shimmered into the office in gorgeous sari, decked with jewellery, fragrant with attar of roses; her way of answering phone in convent educated English drove him crazy. Simply, on the other hand, Katherine is beginning to get suspicious. But it is

Priscilla who finds out his relationship with Nandhini. She opened the door, while he is sleeping with Nandhini. When he tried to convince Priscilla, she creamed as "I don't want you to touch me! I hate you, Daddy!" (41) and ran out of the house towards the street. So, his marriage with Katherine collapsed.

He returned to his home town without his wife and daughter. His affair with Nandhini makes Priscilla angry and results in a clash between her mother and father. The collapse of the family had devastating effects on the young children especially Priscilla. The divorce of her parents severely affected her. She could neither forgive her father nor forget the incident. She gives reasons as: "but I cannot forgive him. Not just for doing what he did, hurting Mom, destroying the family I'd always taken for granted. But also for being careless enough and thoughtless enough to do it there, in mom's and his bed, on that afternoon and letting me find him" (79).

Her hate for her father fuels feminist practice in her. When she was with her mother in New York, she hesitated to befriend with her classmate. Now, as a young woman she realizes the need of a male companion in the place of her father. "I wanted a pair of strong male arms around me again. I wanted to be thrown up in the air again and caught as I came down. I wanted so much to find someone who'd help me forget Dad" (79).

Nine years passed by since her family left for America, now Priscilla, again returns to India as a doctoral candidate from New York University. She stays in a small town of Zalilgarh in north India. She works as a volunteer for HELP us, which is an NGO working to control population explosion in India. As a volunteer in an organization, Priscilla wants to help one poor woman namely Fatima Bi, a mother of seven children. Fatima was so dismayed when she discovered herself pregnant again. So she asks Priscilla to suggest what she could do with her pregnancy. Fatima was suggested to get her baby aborted at the government center. Her

husband Ali had gone out of the town for three days. She aborted the baby by the time he comes back.

Ali, after knowing all this, beats his wife. He was angry with Priscilla who suggested the abortion. Ali had gone mad. With eyes bloodshot and red, he was heard screaming "I'll kill the foreign whore". This unexpected development frightened Priscilla and all her hopes of a possible escape rest on the District Magistrate, Laxman. He was the only man with whom she could share everything. In their first meeting, she found herself attracted towards him. She fell in love with him, even after knowing well that Laxman was married and having a daughter. Laxman was also attracted towards Priscilla. He could find in her a wise person with whom he could discuss everything ranging from culture, history, politics and even the very concept of marriage. Laxman was so intoxicated in his longing for Priscilla that he was even ready to desert his wife and daughter. He plans to fly for America and settle down with Priscilla.

Geetha found out Laxman's relationship with Priscilla. She, as a typical Indian woman, turned to God for a possible remedy for the crisis that was potent enough to blast her family. Unlike, Katherine, she pinned her hopes on the Almighty for a happy solution to her problem. She did not take any hasty decision, she was not angry with her husband but tolerated his wrongdoings and was ready to forgive and forget the illegal affair totally. She was so resilient that she never even thought of separation. Katherine was also so resilient but decided to lead a separate life. She did not think about her family and the welfare of her children. But Geetha was thoughtful. She wanted her husband, her family, and her children. She paid regular visits to the Shiv temple every Saturday, and used to seek the help of a Swamiji who resides there. She was ready to do anything to protect her family. But she, as an Indian woman, always found solace in shifting the responsibility of getting her problems solved by God or a Swamiji. She used

to request him: "...what can I do Swamiji? I cannot talk to him about this. It would kill me if I had to tell him what I knew! I can only turn to God, Swamiji, and to you. Please conduct a special puja for me to help me keep my husband!" (227) and she continues: "I don't care about the expenses. I don't care how you do it, use tantra, do thantava, use anyone and anything you want, Swamiji, but please I don't let this foreign devil-women with my husband" (227).

Fortunately, Laxman deeply rooted in Indian culture and tradition suddenly changes his plan and discloses his mind to Priscilla as: "forgive me, but I must end our relationship. I love you but I cannot leave my wife, and daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my love" (239). Priscilla too, accepted his words and plans to leave India after meeting him for one last time. Her last visit to meet Laxman at Kotli proved fatal. She was murdered by an unidentified person.

Thus, the family of Rudyard was totally decimated by some unfortunate and unexpected problems in India. Rudyard was a normal person. He came to India with lots of dreams. Contrary to his expectations, things in his life took worse turns, and at last he lost his daughter. He was the one to mainly blame for all that happened in his life. But the political climate in India was also partly responsible. Moreover, the couple's inability to handle to crisis, initiated by the social, religious, and political happenings, can be viewed as the prime factor behind all the misfortunes that devastated their family. Katherine Hart was entirely opposite to Geetha. She did not make any attempts like Geetha to restore happiness in her family. She simply got divorce and began to live with her daughter separately. The Hart family collapsed due to Rudyard's deceptive nature and Kathrine's lack of tolerance and thoughtfulness. She thought only about her individuality, pride and life. She was a mother too that she ignored totally. Here comes the role of culture. Here comes the supremacy of Indian culture. Betrayal is everywhere. We

should be resilient enough to forget and forgive the wrongdoings, at least for the sake of the unfortunate children.

Through the novel, Tharoor pin-points reasons for crisis in family like loss of job, dishonesty, infidelity, and extramarital relationship. Crisis causes pain within families and the pangs can be cured by love and care for one another. Caring is the domain of women. Hence, it is imperative that they cultivate tolerance and perseverance, and be strong in mind to meet the challenges of life. Crisis, as it has already been stated, is almost a part and parcel of all lives all around the world. It is the duty and responsibility of both men and women to resort to protective measures to recover and promote happiness within the family.

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