

RESEARCH ARTICLE



SOCIO-POLITICAL THEMES IN SHASHI THAROOR'S RIOT AND AMITAV GHOSH'S *RIVER OF SMOKE*

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ABSTRACT

Brinda Bose, a critic analyzes about Amitav Ghosh: he has a "keen understanding.... of the political, historical, sociological and cultural nuances of his subjects ...and [it] is this sensibility that sets him apart from the clutch of Indian novelists in English that are springing from the woodwork ever since Rushdie immortalized the genre". (Bose, 2003:18-19).

This quotation holds good in the works of Amitav Ghosh as well as Tharoor, who deal and delve deep into the social and political issues from the Twenty First century's points of view.

Contemporary social issues are at the epicenter of Amitav Ghosh's works and politicizing social themes is the hallmark of Shashi Tharoor's novels. Social issues like caste and class based exploitation is a major sub theme in Tharoor's Riot and Ghosh's River of Smoke. All the passengers of the elite class had separate cabins in their deck to stay away from unwanted interference. Neel Rattan, Raja of Raskhali's son had a separate enclosure on board the Anahita, in Riot also Priscilla Hart though a secular American woman volunteer was kept away by the locals of Zalilgarh to avoid the clashes and the intellectual gap.

Exploitation women is a constant feature in Tharoor and Ghosh. In the Sea of Poppies, Deeti underwent marital rape by her husband's brother in order to further her generation and in the River of Smoke Bahram Modi marries a widow of a rich family and exploits her wealth.

Political issues like Postcolonial hangover is resolved in the River of Smoke by abolishing the Opium trade. An offshoot of Post-Colonialism is the MNC culture or the Coke culture which as a result brings about crumbling family values in Tharoor's Riot.

Political thematic concerns like divisive politics, social status through political connections, politics of identity, attaining secularity through political hegemony and final order in a globalised world are analysed and brought to the forefront. Ultimately, history should not repeat itself!

Key Words: Women Exploitation, Caste Discrimination, Divisive Politics, Politics of Identity, Order in a Globalised World, Post-Colonialism.

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Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh are both writers of the twenty first century whose novels have created a phenomenon in the genre of Indian writing in English. They mostly portray contemporary themes and bring to their readers a sort of realization of the events happening in the past (history) and the present (social situation). An intermingling of these time periods coupled with a tinge of the current political and social issues makes their novels a kind of fact cum fiction based reading.

For my reading I have taken Amitav Ghosh's *River of Smoke* and Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. Both these novels deal with the same thematic concerns like divisive politics, post-colonialist themes, suppression women, etc. My analysis would firstly be dealt around the social themes as portrayed in the respective novels.

Deeti the central character of the *River of Smoke* becomes almost a saint like woman and she has a memory-temple of her own called Deetiji ka smriti mandir. In Tharoor's *Riot* also Priscilla Hart a volunteer of the HELP-US a non-governmental organization was educating women about female population control and helping them practice it. She chose to stay in the rural town of U.P. called Zalilgarh. Deeti as we had seen in the *Sea of Poppies* was a tormented woman; tormented because of her marriage to Hukam Singh an infertile man working for the East India Company's Opium factory at Ghazipur. She gets raped by her brother-in-law and begets a daughter. Later she marries Kalua, a low-caste chamar and lives happily. But this seems much against the consent of the elders. Priscilla Hart and Deeti, both suffer at the hands of society. But in the end they acquire a divine status.

Women who suffer the most get an exalted position later on in the eyes of society and God. Priscilla Hart is killed. It remains a mystery whether it was natural death or a suicide? She helped difficult child births, struggled without any comforts in the little town of Zalilgarh, had divorced parents and lived her way through an affair with a married man. Too much for a woman to take! Along with this she was pursuing her doctoral studies at New York University, and was a volunteer for a population control program run by the American group HELP-US.

The same people that society condemns exhorts them later. Excessive suffering brings about a feeling of purgation or purification of the emotions later on.

Socially Deeti was a fallen woman having married twice and begetting two children from two different husbands. Priscilla Hart too was involved in an affair with Lakshman a district magistrate.

Traditional value systems are adhered to by the women characters. Tharoor's and Ghosh's women characters are home makers but by their spouse's disorderly behaviours they turn out to be home breakers.

Priscilla Hart's mother, Katherine Hart shares a very closed relationship with her husband Rudyard. She is an English teacher intellectual in her appearance and quite a traditional woman with middle class values and without any place for togetherness or companionship, whereas Rudyard Hart is quite a fun-loving, light hearted man. There starts an ego-clash and they are headed for a divorce. Katherine is maternal to the core and travels all the way from US to Zalilgarh to enquire into the probable reasons for Priscilla's death.

Nandhini, Rudyard Hart's secretary runs into an affair with him in order to gratify her sexual instincts. Socially extra-marital affairs are not acceptable, but the novelist's characters are practitioners of it in order to make a temporary escape to a world of ecstasy and happiness.

One's financial status should not be the precursor to determine one's social status. Here in the *River of Smoke* paradoxically Bahram Modi a Parsi opium merchant is adored and none come to his chamber on the ship *Anahita*. Bahram had a Chinese mistress Chi-Mei and a son through her. His wife and daughters lived in Bombay. We don't get a firsthand experience of him performing his husbandly or fatherly duties. His involvement in the opium trade is true to the adage I eat opium, I drink opium and I sleep opium.

The traditional Indian society does not approve of men not performing family related responsibilities. *Riot* has the protagonist Lakshman who doesn't care about his daughter Rekha. Instead, he warns her against having love affairs and carving out a bright future for herself. Parents

should first practice what they preach. Lakshman was a bad father. Psychologically, he had a guilt when he faced his daughter as she caught him red-handed in the act of love making with his secretary. Socially this was a very big, serious problem, firstly the act itself and secondly involving in an infidel relationship.

The same marital bed turns out to be a bed of all strife and pain. Symbolically the injury done to the heart cannot be healed. He couldn't face his own creation anymore, his dear daughter.

Riot delves deep into the notion that religion is not merely chanting of prayers, performing pujas or worshipping any particular God, in fact it is a way of life. The ultimate aim of all religions is to be a secular human being and cultivate common good.

Rive of Smoke reiterates the guiding principles of the Parsi faith which taught 'Humata, Hukhta and Hvarshta' i.e. good thoughts, good words and good deeds. Bahram Modi was a devout Parsi and read the Khordeh Avesta everyday and also visited the Fire Temple for worship.

Religion is a great binding force; socially and psychologically too the mind derives its vigour from practicing and meditating on the precepts of a virtuous life. Both Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh believe in a fulfilling life socially through religious indulgence. The middle class Indian mentality is subtly dealt with here.

Shankar Das the Project Director of HELP-US in India justifies to Mrs Hart the mother of Priscilla Hart that "the objective is to inform poor rural women of family planning techniques...more importantly educate them the facts of life"(12).

They are traditional and still believe in begetting children, but being unable to feed them and bring them up would be a great challenge. Even though Priscilla tries her best at educating them against lots children, she fails in her endeavour as Fatima Bi's husband threatens to shut down her clinic. Tharoor reminds us that the superstitious mindset of the Indian community should change.

Similarly, in the River of Smoke too Indians are portrayed to be believers of tradition. Deeti makes Neel, raja Neel Rattan's son to draw on her walls with charcoal as all the other jahaz bhais had done before. Neel draws the image of a man with a

beard. The figure is the image of the opium merchant Bahram Modi.

The Indian community has a nostalgia for the past always. They continue to live with this feeling even after years have passed. Natural beauty was a stress buster to the social conditions of sea sickness that the passengers of the ship otherwise experienced. Mr Penrose was a nursery owner, he gathered all sorts of plants in his garden and also owned a vessel Redruth. Varieties of flowers and plants adorned his nursery like Mexican orange, Gaultheira Shallon an ornamental cum medicinal plant and tulips, cornflowers and columbines.

'Riot' has a beautiful scenic place called the kotli where Priscilla and Lakshman met. Against the backdrop of this scenic wonder their minds and hearts become united as one. A river flowed across the temple and a lovely sunset welcomed them every evening. Hence nature conspired to gladden and lighten one's mood both spiritually and physically.

Deeti's offspring Girin her second husband Kalua's child and Lakshman's unborn and illegitimate child of Priscilla were but unlucky children as they had to undergo the society's wrath and condemnation. They would never acquire the status of a son or daughter as Priscilla's is born out of an illegitimate relationship and Deeti's son Girin was brought up in the shrine only, without being exposed to the outer world of reality.

Priscilla Hart dies, leaving the unborn child in the womb itself and Deeti's son Girin was separated from his father. Their respective parents' sins came upon them. Hence, parents should be watchful of every word and deed for according to the bible; one generation's sins would be a punishment and curse for seven successive generations.

What is one's own by marriage is not regarded the same by the society. In the River of Smoke, Bahram Modi the Parsi opium merchant was to live with his in-laws as a 'house-husband', but the son-in-law staying with the wife's parents is a social stigma. A proverb about the son-in-law in India is 'kutra pos, bilara pos per jemeina jenyane varma khos' This could be explained as rear a dog, rear a cat, but shove the son-in-law and his offspring into the gutter.....(48).

After the wedding vows are taken, it is only on paper that the couple and the families are united but in traditional societies particularly the Eastern cultures in-laws (daughter or son-in-law) become out-laws. They are fundamentally limited in role and their participation in family matters are not welcome.

In *Riot*, Lakshman feels bound by responsibility and doesn't want to select Priscilla as a partner over his wife Geeta. Lakshman quells his mere physical desire over Priscilla and reminds his mental self of his marital duties towards the wife as well as the fatherly duties to his daughter Rekha. He exclaims, "I have been brought up to believe that such things – marriage, family, are beyond individual will, that they transcend an individual's freedom of action (202).

The patriarchal system of family was still ruling the roost in the twenty first century. In Tharoor's *Riot* Kadambari an extension worker of the HELP-US project questioned Fatima Bi's decision to ask her husband before aborting her eighth child still unborn. Fatima Bi was reinforced by Priscilla the idea that it was her body and her womb and most of all her own will to abort the unborn child. In Ghosh's *River of Smoke*, Bahram Modi too sends his mistresses and babies away after paying them considerable amounts of money for livelihood. The patriarchal system controls all the living as well as the women's welfare without considering its ups and downs.

One plant called the *Camellia Sinensis* from which Tea came was England's major revenues. Ghosh acknowledges the supremacy of the colonials i.e. the British. Socially and politically the British were rulers and monarchs. Europeans traded in tea trade in return for camels in Arabia. But this was not very successful. Canton and Macau were two Chinese cities where the Was not allowed. Ghosh here in the *River of Smoke* is attacking the imperial rule and promotes the post-colonial theory in his novel. In Tharoor's *Riot* also we see divisive politics between the American (Priscilla Hart) and the Indians (people of Zalilgarh).

Priscilla never liked the riot liked conditions that existed in Zalilgarh. For instance she notes down in her diary about the certification of Sita's innocence and the ordeal of fire, she had to go

through. She was also affected with the Ram Rajya or the rule of Lord Ram on the Ram Janmabhoomi site as against the appearance of the Babri Masjid of the Muslims.

Priscilla's observation of Sita's subjection to the ordeal of Fire was that rumours or gossip should not be social realities, appearances are more important than truths. And she also emphasizes that when a woman is pointed a finger at by society she gets no support from men. If ever there's a solution, it would be a death for her.

Women's problems have continued to this day in India and the chastity of women is considered an issue in the twenty first century. For men, their social standing is never questioned. Secularism is actually practiced in India despite all the differences. Professor Mohammed Sarwar in the *Riot* is a Reader of the Delhi University, he mentions an instance of secularism by quoting Hindus worshipping Muslim saints as Nizamuddin Auliya, Moinuddin Chisti, Shah Madar etc. Religious tolerance among the two communities is present according to him. A few communal crossovers happen just after the communal clashes. Hindu women also pray at the tomb of Ghazi Miyan, a great muslim warrior.

In the *River of Smoke* also we see the ideal of secularism being practiced. We see Bahram Modi a Parsi opium dealer socializing with Fitcher Penrose a Chinese flower merchant and Zadig Karabedian, an Armenian watchmaker. Zadig lived in a Jewish quarter of Cairo and made connections with Basra, Colombo, Bombay, Canton and Aden. Ghosh brings in his characters a globalised outlook and broad minded thinking, all of which are necessary for a holistic development of an individual.

Political themes that are embedded in these novels of Ghosh's *River of Smoke* and Tharoor's *Riot* are mainly the post-colonial hangover, immigration, social status through political connections, politics of identity, and secularity through political ideologies and Social order in a globalised world.

The post-colonial hangover is dealt with by Amitav Ghosh in a very strong way. There is a resolution to the opium problem in the *River of Smoke*. The British merchants final agree upon the ill-effects of the opium trade they cultivated. A letter addressed to Charles Elliot says it all. It goes: "For nearly forty years British merchants led on by the

East India Company have been driving a trade in violation of the highest laws and the best interests of the Chinese empire. This course has been pushed so far as to derange its currency, to corrupt its officers and ruin multitudes of its people. The traffic has become associated in the politics of the country with embarrassments and evil omens.....(537).

The colonial domination of the British is evident here and also the negatives of the cultivation of opium trade. Hence in order to prevent the further spread of this trade all opium chests get destroyed and the factory at Ghazipur is razed down. The British also declare the opium trade as Free Trade and withhold their sovereignty over the Chinese.

In the Riot also a resolution to the political problem of Zalilgarh is bought about. The whole town was burning and Priscilla Hart's soul was literally set afire as she died a very superstitious death. An American woman had nothing to do in a communal clash between Hindus and Muslims. Lakshman says, "we are where we are at the only time we have". "Perhaps its where we are meant to be" (267).

Priscilla dies paying for her sins and her child in the womb too couldn't come into the world. Priscilla's colonial domination of strife had ended.

Migration is another politically connected theme here in the respective novels. Priscilla Hart travels all the way from the US to spread awareness about the population control program in a rustic town of Zalilgarh in U.P. She pens a poem on Christmas Day at Zalilgarh. A few lines run:

"Mists of dust on crumbling roadsides,
Cow dung sidewalks, rusting tin-roofs.
Bright-painted signboards above dimly lit shops.
The tinkle of bicycle bells, the loud cries....
The dirty white dhotis of dirty brown men.
Weaving in and out of traffic, in and out.
In and out of their sad- eyed women.
Clad in gaily colored saris, clutching
Babies, baskets, burdens too heavy.
For their under nourished bodies" (15).

Priscilla describes the steeped-in tradition kind of an existence here in Zalilgarh. They run about their routine existence and so do the women

folk delivering one child after another. In the ending lines Priscilla writes:

"It is God's will. But not my God's.
To their will I oppose my wont.
Give me strength, oh Lord, to make things change.
Give me the time to make a difference".
Firstly, she prays for the people to accept her, secondly Priscilla wishes that the positive change of Family Planning might be implemented in this little town. Then only her mission could be accomplished.
The India Today critiques this novel Riot as "If migration is the movement that animates history to the rhythm of the outcast's heart beat, Amitav Ghosh is its most elegant choreographer".

In the River of Smoke too Bahram Modi migrates to China to trade in Opium and develops a liking for Chinese products. Shireenbai his wife prevents him from going to China when the country stops opium import as she fears a war would ensue. For migrants, life security is a major and an important issue. They are their own protectors of law.

The next political theme is enhancing social status through political connection. In the Riot, we see that Lakshman the District Magistrate comes in touch with Priscilla Hart, a volunteer of social causes. He explains to her about the caste system in India; how twenty five states in India have ethno linguistic entities and also the Hindu-Muslim clash. Lakshman was indirectly creating a good impression in Priscilla's mind that he was a responsible citizen of the country.

Following this he goes forward and starts an affair with her. The key of the kotli which was bought by Lakshman symbolically is the lock to all the social and political struggles that Priscilla goes through. She gets entangled in a web of social, political and personal problems. Sex, Riot and an unsuccessful social worker- were all the different facets of her personality. Apart from this her intellectual endeavour of completing the doctoral dissertation hangs in the loom.

River of Smoke has Vico, a co-passenger on the ship develop many connections in Fanqui town. He was a food and liquor freak like the people in the

Accha Hong. He was liked by many on the ship as he knew a lot about varied cultures. He once exclaimed to Neel that the Chinese were rich men but here in Fanqui town, they were all struck with poverty. Riot also had Rudyard Hart maintain social ties with India as he was to take over as the Marketing Director of India in the Coca-Cola company. He maintained good India connections from the beginning like exploring places and also his parents had a fascination for Indian soil. His knowledge and participation of the middle class social life in India was awesome. He figures out that 200 million consumers of coke in India were a reality as against the 35 million since a coke a week was very affordable.

George Fernandez the socialist politician of India wanted supply of clean drinking water first and not coke. He was totally against the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973. Mr. Hart got a new social uprising after he began working with the Indians and it took him three years to get a firm footing in India with the penetration of coke. Ironically he was "attacked as a tool of Western Imperialism" (34).

Politics of Identity, a major political sub theme in this novel is all so obvious. We have in the River of Smoke Baboo Nob Kissin a Bengali on the Anahita identifies himself as an English educated elite and a decent man. He was shrewd in some things but on the other hand he was a popular and cordial personality. Another character Captain Elliott was the representative of the Queen in China. He was a top gun and a diplomat too with important connections in both the society and government. His social status was identified because of his political identity.

Paulette was another character on board the Anahita whose father Pierre Lambert was an outcast in the European society since he was a plain curator of the Botanical gardens. The European society discriminates people based on their profession. Here in Pierre Lambert's case the politics of misidentity existed.

In Riot, Randy Diggs, local journalist of the New York Journal reasons out that Ram Charan Gupta a Hindu chauvinist leader was behind the riots and the conflict that followed. He was not elected in the parliamentary elections but his

attitude was quite reasonable and apolitical. This is a clean chit given to the politicians of India who otherwise are invariably corrupt and termed fraudsters.

The next sub points is attaining Secularity through political harmony. Secularism can only be attained by peaceful co-existence of various religious groups. At the denouement (end) of the novel Lakshman the Magistrate and his Superintendent of Police Gurinder Singh significantly try to put an end to the communal violence that took place. The mob mentality is explained by Gurinder Singh. He says in riots "people strike first and ask questions later"(266).

As a resolution to the problem of investigating into Priscilla's death Mrs and Mr Hart raise several rhetorical questions inside their own selves which would remain unanswered for all eternity. Lakshman's adage "I'm overworked, overweight and married", rings a bell in their ears always and that their daughter Priscilla had an extramarital affair and died unwanted would leave a permanent scar in their tainted memories.

Political and personal problems give rise to social problems. In the River of Smoke, the end of the novel projects Fanqui town as 'white town', a clean city with no trace of opium. Henceforth opium imports were to come from India and not China after the British won the opium war.

Queen Victoria's letter to the commissioner read "Our heavenly court treats all within the four seas as one great family; the goodness of our great emperor is like heaven, that covers all things. There is no religion so wild or so remote that he does not cherish and tend it." (543). Hence, Secularism can be achieved only by politically harmonious relations between nations.

Last but not the least; order in a globalised world is the ultimate political aim of every world citizen. In the Riot, Lakshman's words "we are where we are at the only time we have" is the firm idea that destiny ultimately rules over the laws of nature. Man is completely helpless and persuaded to go with the tide of fate's doings. The River of Smoke also emphasizes the fact that righteousness is the key to social order. Opium trade is final abolished as well as the ill-effects thereafter.

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