



Little Flaws And Little Slips In Shashi Tharoor's Novel "Riot"

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ABSTRACT

The critical article titled "Little Faults and Little slips in Shashi Tharoor's 'Riot'" attempts to highlight the untied knots of the story line. The novel is based on the communal riots that engulfed our nation in the early part of 1990s. But the author has used his imagination to focus on an innocent American victim named Priscilla Hart, who actually stays in Zailgarh for her field work associated with her Ph.D. But her killing evokes hue and cry in the American press. A journalist named Randy digs prepares to dig out the truth through interviews. Though the author titled the novel as Riot, his focus was mainly on the death of Priscilla. In spite of this focus, there are some untied knots in the storyline. He leaves many a questions unanswered. The article doesn't try to retie the knot, but tries to throw light on it.

Key word : Shashi Tharoor, Literature, Novel

Shashi Tharoor, a renowned Indian writer of modern times has spent much of his energy in showcasing the best dimensions of India to the outside world. Such a great writer came out with an imaginative masterpiece titled "Riot" in the year 2001. The novel was a literal eye-opener to the dangers of communalism. Though the novel has been acclaimed as a masterpiece, there are some inherent flaws and slips in its storyline. These flaws get detected on repeated readings, and glimmers as a glaring example of creative slip. This article makes a genuine effort to ferret out the missing link with a microscopic eye.

The story of the novel "Riot" is a simple thing at the outset. It is about the death of an American lady in a communal riot that bursts in an Indian city by name Zailgarh. The dead American lady is Priscilla Hart, who worked as an extension worker in the 'Help us' organization. The organization is an American centric organization that was involved in population control program in India. In the course of her stay, she develops an intimate relationship with the district magistrate Mr. Lakshman. The relationship evolves into a sexual relationship and many a days are lasciviously spent in a lonely historical site by name Kotli. Due to the relationship, Lakshman is even tempted to elope with Priscilla to USA. But this plan gets stalled due to the advice of the former's friend Gurinder Singh who is the Superintendent of Police in the same town. Meanwhile in the month of October, riots erupt and both the officers are in full steam to stop the riots between the warring communities. At the end of the riot, Priscilla is found dead near the very same Kotli where she romanced with the DM. Her parents are informed about her death, and they air dash to Delhi.

This beautiful episode has some naked flaws in it, though the narration makes the readers feel that all is well. The slender cracks are visible with the arrival of Katharine Hart and Rudyard Hart- the parents of Priscilla Hart. Both Katharine and Rudyard are very casual in their approach throughout their travel. Their air travel is said to be filled with memories of past, but seldom does tear well up their eyes. Rudyard reads newspaper casually, though Katharine feels that he is full of sorrow internally. At the New Delhi airport,

Rudyard seems to be searching for the press people. He is seemingly disappointed with the less number of press people present. This casual attitude is against the law of nature, for the readers start doubting the very American society. Even though culturally the American families are slightly detached, it is unbelievable that a father lacking the inherent emotions and feelings. Even in his meeting with Randy Diggs- the press person of New York journal- Rudyard boozes and boasts about his exploits and seldom does he feel for his lost daughter. The whole setting with these American parents is totally unbelievable and unrealistic in nature. Also, the absence of the embassy staff raises the readers' eyebrows, for it is a usual pattern for the embassy staff to help the victim's family. The absence of Priscilla's brothers is one more anomaly. The reason attributed for their absence is said to be their busy schedule and this too sounds comical. Thus the author has failed to bring out the real sensitivities of the family and probably this has made the whole atmosphere look artificial.

The cracks don't pause there, but spreads further. Sane readers question the whereabouts of her body. Was the body subjected to post mortem? The question has no answer. Above all, what happened to the funeral? Where did it take place? Why didn't her parents attend it? All these questions have no answers in the book. It is also a well known practice for years that if a foreigner dies in India; their body is usually taken to their native land for burial. But it is unmentioned in the novel "Riot". Another unbelievable thing in the flow of the narrative is the silence amongst the diplomatic community. Though the American press makes hue and cry over her death, the embassy is absolutely silent. It doesn't apply any pressure on the local authorities to conduct a detailed inquiry in to her death. In fact, they lamely accept the version of the Zailgarh administration regarding Priscilla's death.

One more fault lies in the destruction of evidences regarding "Lakshman-Priscilla" relationship by the SP of Zailgarh Gurinder Singh. Fine, it could be believed, but what about Cindy Rogers's communication with Priscilla. Priscilla's close friend Cindy stays in USA and Priscilla maintains postal communication with her.

In the communication, she reveals everything regarding her relationship to Cindy. But Cindy never comes into picture at all after Priscilla's death. In spite of the coverage given to the latter's death by the American media, it is amusing that Cindy never contacts anyone to reveal the truth.

Moreover the death of Priscilla in itself is a mystery. It is said that she visited Kotli during riots. If that is to be believed, will she visit Kotli during a curfew? -Since, Zailgarh was under curfew due to riots during that time. Even if the readers accept the storyline that women alone were allowed to break the curfew, it is unbelievable that Priscilla could go thus far on such a day. Since Kotli was far away from the town, and it was seen as the place where some anti social elements produced country bombs earlier to attack the procession, will it be left unguarded? Certainly, there should have been police pickets in such a lonely place. So the story of Priscilla visiting Kotli alone and being killed by someone is slightly unbelievable.

Even before her death, she developed an illicit relationship with Lakshman. Their bed room was Kotli, and usually Priscilla waits there by hiding her bicycle in the bushes. Later, Lakshman would arrive and would ask his driver to wait with an assumption that he wouldn't understand the reasons behind the DM's frequent visits to that lonely place. After the arrival of both, they would open a room in Kotli, where they would taste the pleasures of sex without any hindrance. It is too romantic, sounding like 'Beowulf'. It should be understood that only if the driver was a thoroughbred fool and a living mummy, reticence is possible. It is natural that a frequent visitor to any place

would evoke suspicion in an onlooker. But here it is strange that the driver is silent and ignorant of all the 'lilas' that take place in Kotli. Not only the driver, but kotli is so isolated that there are no other people around Kotli to suspect Lakshman. Even a buzz of rumor doesn't arise in the town regarding the affair. These are flaws which are too obvious and open, but one flaw which disturbs the readers is the guiltless Lakshman. Lakshman proclaims throughout the novel that he loves Priscilla. But after her death, while giving interviews to the American journalist, there is no sense of guilt in him. In fact, he avoids Priscilla totally while narrating about the riots to Randy diggs. If this is his real nature, it spoils the nation's image. Occasionally, foreigners are being raped in places like Goa, is this not one that belongs to the same category? Is Lakshman not a criminal? These questions have no answers.

There is one more comic fault in the novel. It relates to an elderly cousin of Lakshman, who is said to be working in an MNC. One pertinent question that need to be asked is did India really have an MNC in 1990? No, it is impossible, since Liberalisation began in the year 1991 and brought many foreign companies to India to set up shops. So, there can't be any question of his cousin working in an MNC, since the whole story take place in 1980s.

All these cracks in the story line points out to some unanswered questions in the narration. It may or may not be deliberate, but still it itches the sensitive minds. Its an outpouring of one of the itched minds, but still let the article end with a quote that admonishes the readers to read with "willing suspension of disbelief"