

Vol. 7, No. 4: CLRI November 2020 | p 141-148

Dialectics of Women's Resilience in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*

Sher Haidar Khan

Abstract

Historically speaking, patriarchy makes women undergo physical and psychological traumas right from their birth. While few women lose their lives, others survive the odds and demonstrate a great degree of resilience against inequities and injustices occurring across the board. Shashi Tharoor's novel *Riot* is one of the best examples for this where women are depicted as resistant, resilient against atrocious social systems. Therefore, the present research paper attempts to highlight the dialectics of women's resilience in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. This paper can be divided into three parts. The first part is meant to highlight the persistence and resilience of women against universally presumed asymmetrical stereotypical patriarchal system accompanied by an overview of theorists and writers whose theories and ideas helped women maintain their resilience against the unjust systems. The second part provides a brief introduction to Shashi Tharoor and his position in Indian English literature. The third

part highlights narratives of resistance, resilience and representation of women in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. Thus, this paper is a conscious attempt to appreciate the resilience of women against patriarchal game of power and pre-established discriminatory systems.

Keywords: Dialectics, Patriarchy, Representation, Stereotypes, Resilience, Asymmetry.

Historically speaking, women have always been treated as an inferior, voiceless, marginalised section of society. Patriarchal thoughts have been responsible for this discrimination and injustice which prevented women to take their own decisions in different facets of life. Their freedom was reduced to the fore wall of the house on the pretext of self-created assumptions that naturally they were not fit for outside environment and supposed to be confined within certain specified boundaries of house. Consequently, this culturally imposed seclusion kept women away from the public discourse which further isolated them from social, cultural and political representation. This made women substantially invisible to social, cultural and historical analysis as compared to their male counterparts. Although, with the passage of time few thinkers and writers realised the injustice talking place against women and raised voices to bring them out of invisibility advocating their rights in different walks of life. Simone de Beauvoir, Julia Kristeva, Michel Foucault, and Helene Cixous, Elaine Showalter, Virginia Woolf were these leading figures whose ideas helped women maintain resilience against a discriminatory unjust systems.

Shashi Tharoor is an internationally recognised author, diplomat and politician. He has authored several fiction and non-fictional books. *Riot* is one of his famous novels based on the real Hindu-Muslim riot that occurred due to the Ayodhya conflict. It was published in 2000, set in the backdrop of a riot in India in 1989. It is a novel about love, hate, cultural collision, religious fanaticism, the ownership of history, and the impossibility of knowing the truth. In *Riot*, Shashi Tharoor presents the character of Priscilla Hart from the perspective of her persistent struggle and resilience against traditional discriminatory systems and her struggle for culturally marginalized women residing under the unbridled control of preposterous patriarchal mores. Tharoor presents Priscilla Hart as a woman not only resilient but also fostering the spirit of resistance and resilience in other women who have not realized their own identities even towards the end of the postmodern twentieth century.

In the novel, Priscilla Hart strongly raises her voice for women's social rights and fights for social transformations to make them free from their previously determined confinements of narrow gender roles. Priscilla is a 24-year-old American resilient women volunteer working for an NGO, 'Help-Us', persistently engaged in creating awareness among women about population control. Her task is very difficult as she is going to work in the midst of people who are illiterate and backwards. She toils hard to wake up those ladies who have not woken up or who do not want to wake up for their position in society. However, Priscilla does not find any substantial change as women are so submissive and tolerant that they cannot raise questions against the demands of

patriarchal thoughts and accept any number of pregnancies happily. Nonetheless, she doesn't step back and continue to move towards her altruistic goals to erode insidiously established patriarchal machinations with the sense of optimism which is reflected in lines uttered by her in verse form:

*In and out of their sad-eyed women
Clad in gaily colored saris, clutching
Babies, baskets, burdens too heavy
For their undernourished bodies
Here I have come to do a good. It's true:
So simple a task in so complex a land.
I wheel my bicycle into their habits,
Tell them what's right, what can be done,
And how to do it. They listen to me,
So ignorant, so knowing
They go back to their little huts,
Roll out the chapattis for dinner,
Serve their men first, eat what is left.
And then submit unprotected.*

(Tharoor, 15)

Pricilla's spirit of resilience is visible in given lines showcasing her tenacious determination to bring about transformation in the lives of women. Her prayers to God to provide her durability and wisdom to change lives of these poor and ignorant women are reflective to her unparalleled resilience and patience. Pricilla also accepts that these women are weak and vulnerable to stand up and fight against asymmetrical

traditions of the society. Therefore, Priscilla individually tries to win their confidence by persuading them to stop undesirable children but she has to compensate for this by suffering the wrath of Fatima Bi's husband who calls her a foreigner and threatens to kill her as she is thought to be responsible for the abortion of Fatima Bi's eighth child. Priscilla feels confused as to why they are after her life when she is striving to uplift their condition by showing the way of living with dignity and happiness. Priscilla questions the authenticity of patriarchal society where a woman still suffers domestic violence in spite of sacrificing a lot for her family:

She (Fatima Bi) lives with her husband and seven kids in a two-room flat, cooks in the corner of one of the rooms on an open stove, ... washes their clothes at a public tap, and suffers the demands and the blows of her husband, to judge by a visibly bruised cheek... Besides, still in this modern age, Ali, Fatima Bi's husband, keeps on shouting, "I decide how my wife conducts her life!" Nevertheless, Priscilla firmly believes, "it was his wife's right to have as much information as she needed to decide how to conduct her life.

(Tharoor, 160)

The detailed portrayal of the excruciating events unfolding the brutal violence against Fatima Bi and Sundari in *Riot* extensively justifies Priscilla's resilience and her philanthropic goals, opposing the objectification of women and children in the uneducated rural society of India. While on one hand Tharoor's description of Fatima Bi, as a mother of seven malnourished children, who is afflicted with severe physical wounds due to repeated childbirth and squalor, aggravated by her husband's violent and inhuman treatment, emerges as a glaring example of victimization of women, on the other, Sundari's portrayal as an intelligent and innocent girl, married

off at a young age only to be burnt alive by her husband and mother-in-law, epitomizes the unflinching callousness of Zalilgarh's male chauvinist society in the novel. Priscilla does not want to lose any chance in campaigning on issues of female interests, like women's right to autonomy, pregnancy and education. Priscilla asserts her intentions and her ambitions in a letter to her friend Cindy Valeriani. Emerging as Tharoor's spokesperson in the novel she asserts:

I want to change the lives of these women, the choices they believe they have. I want to see them one day ..., standing around the well discussing their own lives and hopes and dreams.... I want to hear them not say, "My husband, he wants lots of children." But rather, "I will decide when I am ready for a child." I want them instead of planning to arrange their teenage daughter's marriage, to insist on sending her to high school. I want all this for them and that's why I am here.

(Tharoor, 170)

Tharoor highlights the rude picture of uneducated rural society of India and criticizes this through the eyes of Priscilla who is shocked to know that people believe that a female is responsible for the birth of a girl or a boy not the male. And her value in the family is determined by ability to deliver a male child in the family. Priscilla puts forward Sundari's case. Sundari is often taunted and tortured by her mother-in-law for not delivering a male child. Sundari, when brought to the hospital with 75% burns and in her dying voice, recounts her painful story leading to the severe burns. Firstly, she could not bring the expected dowry from her parents. Secondly, she is accused of carrying a female child in her womb. So the result is that her own husband and mother-in-law set her on fire. Priscilla strenuously objects this through following lines:

I see myself as trying to make women aware of their reproductive rights, not just to control population but to give them a sense of their rights as a whole, their rights as women. Being forced to have babies is just one form of oppression, of subjugation by men I want to help these women understand that control of their bodies is a rights issue, it's health issue and if they can improve their health and assert their rights, they will have a real future, and they will give their daughters a real future.

(Tharoor, 171)

Tharoor promotes social, cultural and political interests and rights of women through the character of Pricilla Hart who relentlessly campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, discrimination and sexual objectification of women. Pricilla wants women to be vibrant, active and dynamic for their rights in their society.

To conclude it can be proclaimed, despite facing a great degree of difficulties and obstacles, Priscilla Hart resists the social constructions of gender and sexuality and fights against gender inequality, gender politics, and gender discrimination with great resilience. Coming from a different country, Pricilla is threatened by male masters, but still she firmly campaigns on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, discrimination, stereotyping and oppression of women. Finally, what sounds great and appreciative is her resilience and her constantly stressing of the fact that these deprived and less-privileged women also have the right to cherish their dreams and individualities. Pricilla asserts that women also must have choices about their social and personal lives. Through the character of Pricilla Hart Tharoor envisages a society which ensures equality, liberty and all rights of women irrespective of differences.

References

1. Abrams, M. H. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Madras: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 2013. Print.
2. Tharoor, Shashi. *Riot: A Novel*. New Delhi: Viking, 2001. Print.
3. Beauvoir, Simone De. *The Second Sex*. Vintage Books, 1949.
4. Barry, Peter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary and Culture Theory*. Manchester: Manchester, UP, 2002.
5. Foucault, Michel. *Discipline and punishment: the Birth of the Prison*. Translated by Alan Sheridan. Vintage, 1978.



Sher Haidar Khan

Sher Haidar Khan is currently a Ph.D. Research Scholar at Department of English and Modern European Languages, University of Lucknow, Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, India.



PRIME AT
₹ 999
PER YEAR*

amazonprime

Original Shows 1-day delivery* Ad-free Music

Join now

*T&C Apply

Get Your Book Reviewed

If you have got any book published and are looking for a book review, contact us. We provide book review writing service for a fee. We (1) write book review (2) publish review in CLRI (3) conduct an interview with the author (4) publish interview in CLRI. [Know more here.](#)

Authors & Books

We publish book releases, Press Release about books and authors, book reviews, blurbs, author interviews, and any news related to authors and books for free. We welcomes authors, publishers, and literary agents to send their press releases. Visit our website <https://authornbook.com>.