Civil Society as an Uncharted Theme in Post-Colonial Indian English Fictions: A Critical Application to Shashi Tharoor’s Riot: A Love Story

Abstract: The literary trends in Indian English fiction have witnessedmultitudinous upheavals, from replication of Western models to the reconnaissance of prevailing social, political, and economical milieu of local lives. The present paper aims to trace the treatment of themes especially in Post-Colonial Indian English Novels by contemplating over Riot: A Love Story of Shashi Tharoor. This research paper will try to unveil the splashes of Civil Society as an emerging discourse in literary expressions. The post-Independent Indian English Novelists are less prone to treat the conventional themes, rather more pledged to the current social and political complexities. The paper seeks to look at the Riot in context of Civil Society from dual perspectives.

Keywords: Trends, Western models, Indian English Novels, Civil Society, Milieu.

One of the most conspicuous and illustrious forms of literature, the Novel or fiction is novel to Indian literary domain. The other literary phenomenon such as lyrics, dramas, epics, short stories, have sustained their entities from the ancient times, be it Bharatmuni’s Natyasastra- the earliest ever treatise on the performing art way back in 200 BCF. But it happened only in course of later half of the nineteenth century the novel made its presence on the surface of Indian Literary World. One may argue or raise a question by citing Kadambari of Bana or Vasavadatta of Subandhu as earlier marks if the fiction but the expressed expression would not walk with the fact. It was only possible when the Western values started influencing the Indian Value System. Among other evolvement, it caused the prose writing in territorial languages, initially as functional and later on in artistic modes. There is no denying of the fact that those British Missionaries made Bible available in various regional languages in India by seeking the help from the local experts of that time. And there was a transition of the prose as a medium that got settled in various branches of knowledge, government officials, media etc. And subsequently the Sanskrit Classics were possible to replicate in English language. “The translations of Western Classics, including novels followed. Such rendering could take the form of adaptation and abridgement, or even the Bottomian kind of transformation. The next step was the composition of original works, in distance imitation or under the inspiration of western models”. (Iyengar and Nandakumar).

It is crystal clear fact that Bengal was the first portion of the country where literary Renaissance erupted which flowed through the other parts of the country. From Rajmohan;s Wife of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee till the date , it's been continuous upheavals in treatment of themes in Indian English Fiction. There prevails obscurity about generalizations of novels in India. It has gone through three different stages as exclaimed by Anand Shankar Ray, “when Bankim wrote, the chief question was how to restore the national self-respect. In Rabindranath’s time, it was how to bridge East and West. In this dynamic age, it is how to identify ourselves with the common people”. (Iyengar and Nandakumar)

After India’s release from the British dominance in 1947, the novelists displayed the joy of freedom, prior to the blackest chapter in the history of India that was partition. The post-independent phase imparted their observation on how even after independence, the social milieu like poverty,
corruption, the subjugation of women, entity crisis which have continued flowing through the passage of fiction writings. The freedom compelled novelists to shift their glance from mere domination then to prevailing ills in free India now. The post-partition period supplied a decent amount of the stuff for the novelists to contemplate over and as a result the pieces of fictions like Bhabani Bharracharya’s So Many Hunger (1947), R K Narayan’s Waiting For Mahatma(1955), Kamala Markandya’s Some Inner Fury(1957), Khushwant Singh’s Train to Pakistan(1956), The Dark Dancer(1959) and many more rendered over the devastation of partition and social sickness.

If we peer into the Social life of India, one may find varieties along with vagaries, complexities within the simplicities, agitation within the compositional life and so on. The Post-Colonial Indian English Novelists along with the bulk of regional literary gems, started digging up the societical layers. The old kinds are at no use for female characters that the new generation of women novelists has evolved. They raised the question against Patriarchal authority and Phallocentric codes and conducts. Their characters, especially female protagonist of Chitra Benarjee, Bharti Mukharjee, found The Voice. The advent of 21st century introduced the Diaspora perspectives; say for instance V S Naipaul’s A House For Mr. Biswas where one may witness and experience the rootlessness, homelessness, alienation, and nostalgia. The novels that deal with the prevailing fundamentalism, religious extremism, and religious radicalism are at trend in the current fiction writing. Riot by Shashi Tharoor, In Times Of Siege by Githa Hariharan to name a few.

When it comes to religio-politics or socio-political facets of Indian English Fiction, all the accusing fingers point at the fundamentalism or extremism that often directly link to the political set up. But there is also one operative factor in between the politics and fundamentalism which lurks over in some post-colonial fictions, the role of CIVIL SOCIETY in India.

Civil Society, a term that has always been ignored on the literal surface as it is associated with the social scientist and scholars. However, since literature is a mirror of society, it encompasses all the shades of life from launching of CHANDRAYAN-1-2 to the deleterious existence of woman in remote regions where Rukamini of Nectar in a Sieve laments “... with a dowry, it was perhaps possible she might marry again, without it no man would look at her, no longer a virgin and reputedly barren” (Markandya). Historically speaking the term Civil Society has its ancestries from the fourteenth century emanated from West. Peasant’s War way back in 1381 where John Ball had remarked, “Fellowship is life and lack of fellowship is death, but in hell there is no brotherhood but every man for himself” (Edwards). The speaker would have never given thought to his mind as a part of civil society but the implication have got much receptions in later centuries. But it was only in 1980s when civil society secured its place on the global stage. The downfall of Communalism and the rise of self-governing set ups that followed the disillusionment socio-economic or socio-politics forms of the past, desperate need of uniformity or unity in the universe that looked much insecure and quick prosper of Non-Governmental Organizations [NGOs]. At present it may look a little bit less known as an epitomized solution to prevailing mentioned issues but it is still at the cradle for the governments, media, funding groups and millions of people around the world. According to Libertarian Cato Institute in Washington DC, Civil Society means,

“...fundamentally reducing role of politics in society by expanding free markets and individual liberty.” (Edwards)

Civil Society is a set up to rescue those who unite to question the Power. As stated, “Civil Society became both, a rallying cry for dissidents- a new type of society characterized by liberal democratic norms- and a vehicle for achieving it by building social movement strong enough to overthrow authoritarian states (Edwards). In nutshell, civil society enhances the democratic ideals of citizens. In India’s context, one may say that the entire Gandhian struggle was a part of civil society though informally. But civil society needs democratic platform to flourish and get on the rescue site of the
fellow citizens of that particular country. From 26th January 1950, that heralded India as a democratic nation, the questions about the basic rights have been raising since then. So to sustain economic, political and social arena in the light of democracy, the need of civil society was/is indispensible.

At first glance it looks like ‘Messiah’ for the citizens that would uplift and protect their rights by playing a role of bridge between Private lives and the State. But civil society itself has been accused about its acts and roles of what it is destined to do. Be it WSF (World Social Forum) that was questioned in 2007 at Nairobi conference that there is a lack of self-governance, transparency, equality and inadequate political action within the Forum. The cynical viewpoints have been expressed about the contradictory reality of the Civil Actors. Expert Helmut Anheier remarks, “Institutions that mitigate Violence within states are strengthened by the State’s successful assertion of a monopoly of the means of legitimate violence” (Anheier)

The questions about the LEGITIMACY of civil society can be found in Post- Colonial Indian English Fictions though the critical receptions are yet to be procured. One of the examples where one can find the glimpses beyond the surface level is Riot: A Love Story (2001) of Shashi Tharoor. A novel that deals with the devastation and anarchy, caused by the demolition of Babri Masjid in 1992. At first glance, the novel revolves around the Priscilla Hart, an American dame who had come down to undertake her research work, caught in between the malicious Hindu-Muslim collision.

The novel begins with the death of Priscilla Hart due to the Babri masjid agitation. “No other foreigner has died in the sectarian violence that has killed several hundred Indians in the last three weeks, and Ms. Hart may simply have been in wrong place at wrong times” (Tharoor), responds an embassy spoke person. Her alienated parents Rudyard Hart and Katherine Hart touchdown Zalilgarh all the way from USA and joins Randy Digg who has been reporting the concerned death. Mr. & Mrs. Hart, while lamenting over the loss, try to comprehend the situation. In between they met local chauvinistic Hindu fundamentalist named Ram Charan Gupta who justifies the damage by saying “In Ayodhya, there are many temples to Ram. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore.” According to him the disputed land is actually a Ram Janma Bhoomi that was invaded by the Mughal King Babur. Ram charan further says, “muslims are fanatics and terrorists; they only understand the language of force” (Tharoor). On the other side there is Professor Sarwar who tries to defend radically muslim brigades and clears out, “Muslims didn’t partition the country-the British did, the Muslim League did, the Congress Party did’ (Tharoor). Lakhshman, a district magistrate and SP Gurinder Singh affirm the limitation of bureaucratic agencies due to the intervention of political parties. They are supposed maintain the crowd that has gathered for Ram Sila Poojan rally. The bricks from all the corners of the country got supplied to Ayodhya with the inscribed name of Lord Ram on them. In between the procession the defamatory slogans were chanted that triggered the riot and set the town on fire. Many people got injured and DM along with SP couldn’t handle the situation which was obviously next to impossible to get it in immobile state. The massive amount of the people had assembled on the calls of some so called religious groups. It is quite shocking and surprising that these massacres between the various sects and creeds of society, are mostly erupted after the independence. To get rid of two hundred years of captivity, people from all the sects, from ‘Cross’ to ‘moon’, from ‘trishul’ to ‘conch shell’, from ‘Turban’ to ‘Taqiyah’, every single person came forward to flung the lurking shadows of the dominant foreign power. But this uniformity got shattered once the outsiders got away and the people of India got divided in their respective faiths and rituals, putting aside the NATION that had assembled them.

One may look at this novel from the perspectives of political milieus. But still the question remained unanswered of who lurks in between the political and private domains on the ground? Ram charan, who wants to get elected in upcoming elections, is actually associated with some religious groups. The marches, rallies, shouting and slogans were made possible by the uniformity of
various religious groups, the institutions that usually get legitimacy under the Civil Society, be it hindu religious groups mentioned in the novel or muslim brigades. The question rises of where law and order is or how come political parties or ruling parties prevent the bloodsheds that occur in the name of religion. What Pro. Sarwar remarks, “Politicians of all faith across India seek to mobilize voters by appealing to narrow identities. By seeking votes in the name of religion, caste... ( RIOT, P.145).

As the accusing fingers at the validity of civil society have been raised that since civil society has power to restore or to eliminate the state-power, political parties often pamper the civil actors or one can say, own them to advance their political agendas.

Hence the validity of civil society is at stake as displayed in Riot. Be it charitable trust, terror group or religious brigade, they get legitimacy and advocacy by engrossing themselves at Civil society. At present, one must notice the mob-lynching by cow vigilantes where numbers of innocents have lost their lives. Civil actors are destined to protest what they are united for and they do not possess any right to violate the law and order. There must be a clear line between the Dos and DON'Ts.

Works Cited