

Priscilla Hart's Search for Identities in *Riot*

Amrendra Sharma

I do not so much care about what the woman *feels* I only care about what the woman *is* – what she IS – inhumanly, physiologically, materially
.....

(In Aldous Huxley {ed} 1932, p.198)

This article tries to access and dig into Priscilla Hart's character (the protagonist of *Riot* by Shashi Tharoor) from the perspective of existentialism and feminism. In other words, this paper tries to do an in-depth study of Priscilla Hart's doings and thinking with reference to the beliefs of existentialists and also feminists. The novel is full of instances and conversations which seem to mark her belief in these theories to a fairly significant degree. Nonetheless, she is different from several major woman characters of other novels in the sense that whereas other woman character has been found fighting for the self only, Priscilla Hart fights for masses too especially for those women and even men who suffer a lot because of their ignorance or compulsions of financial instability or a set of prevalent social beliefs. The decision to explore her character from this viewpoint has been taken as surprisingly no critics or reviewers seem to have studied her extensively from these perspectives. Nobel Laureate Elie Wiesel (2001) hails Shashi Tharoor as 'a major voice in contemporary literature.' He has been appreciated for the freshness of

ideas, stylistic novelties, and unrestrained experimentation in narrative technique in *Riot*. Besides, he has also been commended highly to bring in the rhetoric of different types of conflicts and also his great sense of nationalism. Nonetheless, it is somewhat surprising that critics or reviewers have not looked at Priscilla Hart's character from the perspective of her constant battle for gaining her identity as well as helping lots of other women who have not got any clear identities of their own even towards the end of 20th century. Anita Nair in one of the interviews with Bindu Menon (2001) affirms:

There is a lot of strength in women that doesn't come out naturally, it has to be forced out of them – it could be circumstances or a change in lifestyle.

Here we may bring in some basic tenets of existentialism. Tanweer Akram (nd, 1) feels that existentialism highlights the risk, the voidness of human reality and admits that the human being is thrown into the world in which pain, frustration, sickness, contempt, malice and death dominates. The fundamental idea of this school of thought is the study of **being**. It stresses the fact that a human being has no essence if s/he does not think/work for her/his existence. S/He has liberty to choose and decide and, therefore, to make or mar herself/himself. In fact, if s/he allows herself/himself to be carried away by the dictates and necessity of the society, s/he is bound to suffer endlessly. Herein lies the difference between a **thing** and a **being**. Things are only what they are. But the human being is what s/he can be. S/He can add flavour and

essence to her/his life in due course of time. The human being is free to chase and drive her/his dreams home. In addition, existentialists believe that a human being is free to do whatever he pleases. Here Akram (nd, 5) slightly disagrees with them as a human being's freedom is curtailed not only by the objective reality s/he encounters, but also by her/his own limitations. Taking this view as a crucial point, let us attempt to find if Priscilla Hart lives a totally authentic life pursuing her dreams and ambitions. Further, it may also be investigated if she strongly raises her voice for women's autonomy, liberty and rights and freedom as normally a libertarian (individualist) feminist does or as a radical feminist she often hammers for a social change by making them free from their previously determined narrow gender roles. It might also be interesting to discover if Priscilla Hart as a cultural feminist suggests to embrace women's ways in spite of their having biological and psychological differences from men.

Here it may not be out of place to define the beliefs and roles of a cultural, radical and libertarian (individualist) feminist as formulated by Kathy Henry (2007). Cultural feminists accept the biological & psychological differences between sexes, however they feel that the differences can be bridged to a great extent by embracing women's natural ways i.e. their ways of living and doing things. Libertarian (individualist) feminists promote women's rights, autonomy, liberty,

interests and issues and therefore, naturally campaign on issues such as reproductive rights, violence within domestic partnership, discrimination and sexual violence. A radical feminist attempts to challenge patriarchy, stereotyping, sexual objectification and oppression. In fact, it is difficult to consider them as completely separate entities because at times they have been found to overlap too. To elaborate, some issues, like sexual violence are of common interest for both libertarian and radical feminists.

Priscilla is a 24 year-old American volunteer working for an NGO, 'Help-Us.' She is involved in developing awareness among women about population control.

She has come to India because of her father's job when she is only fifteen and has tasted the various realities of India, like the poor and abject condition of the lower class, the bazaars, the cinemas, the mosques and the temples. She has engaged herself in selfless services, such as reading for blind children and helping them living in orphanages.

She returns to India after nine years and starts working on a population control programme in Zalilgarh, a district in UP. She gets moved with the condition of Zalilgarh with broken and dusty roads, cow dung on side walks and rusted tin shades, walls full of betel leaves stains and poor people clad in dirty dhotis. All these make her task difficult as she is going to work in the midst of people who are not enlightened in a

big way. She tries to wake up those ladies who have not woken up or who do not want to wake up on their own. She does not find anything changing as women are still so submissive that they cannot raise a question even for their welfare rather they submit to the demand of their men folk and accept any number of pregnancies happily. In her scrapbook (on 5 Dec 1989), Priscilla, as a radical and individualist feminist, writes in a verse form:

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
To the heaving thrusts of their protectors,
Abusers, masters. One more baby comes,
To wallow in misery with the rest. (15-16)

The task that she has undertaken is truly a difficult one. Rather than getting depressed, this idealistic and determined lady prays to God to give her strength and wisdom to change and make a difference to these poor and ignorant women. Her task is not so easy because religion, age-old traditions and the male's ego intervene in achieving her objective. Further, she also accepts that these women folk are so talented, so knowing, yet so weak to stand up and fight against the prison house of their tradition and society in limiting their family and thus providing their children a quality life and preserving their health too. She tries to

win their confidence by persuading them to stop undesirable children but she has to pay a price 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. She feels confused as to why they are after her life when she is trying to uplift their condition by showing the way of living with dignity and happiness. This comes up as a great conflict in any developing nation where normally one is not ready to take into account another's perspective, where one does not want to change, where one does not wish to stand and ask questions regarding his/her better future. This could be perceived as a socio-cultural clash in constructing and performing individualistic identity.

As a radical feminist she 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!" (p. 160). 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" (p. 160).

Priscilla does not want to lose any chance in campaigning on issues of universal interests, like women's right to autonomy, pregnancy and education:

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. (p. 170)

Related to the above mentioned issues are issues of reproductive rights and a right to sound health. Priscilla very boldly tries to bring these rights home in Zalilgarh which is still a sleeping town unaware of any new thinking:

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. (p. 171)

The American version of the novel has been subtitled "A Love Story" as this is really a sensual, stormy, ill fated romance between Priscilla Hart, the American family planning counselor and V Lakshman (nicknamed Lucky), an older married government official posted as the District Magistrate. The two different titles of the same novel seem to echo a conflict between two diverse approaches in constructing and performing social identities of men and women in terms of their inter-

personal relationship. Shashi Tharoor also expresses somewhat identical views in *The Hindu* on 16 September 2001:

American readers looking for a love story will find a novel about the construction of identity, the nature of truth and the ownership of history; Indian readers expecting a novel about the dangers of communalism will discover a tale of another kind of passion.

In fact, the novel is superbly rich with a lot of magical descriptions of cross-cultural love and really deserves to earn *Riot* its subtitle as a love story, though a tragic one. This tragic love story makes Priscilla emerge as a robust, individualist feminist. Lakshman seems stuck in a loveless marriage though he is deeply attached to his daughter. Naturally, in spite of getting true love and a very high degree of physical satisfaction, he vacillates between sacrificing his career and family for an American girl. She considers even her first encounter with him a very romantic one:

...there was something about his voice that reached out and drew me in, something that was both inviting and yet reassuring. It was a voice like a warm embrace, a voice that was seductive. (p. 19)

Though she is aware of the fact that he is already married and has a daughter, she falls in love with him and very soon starts enjoying all the moments spent with him. The novel is replete with lots of very detailed sensual encounters which Lakshman is also very fond of. He develops his interest to the extent of deserting his wife and leaving for the USA with Priscilla but the age-old tradition and his love for his daughter, for his country and for his job stop him from taking an extreme step of

stepping out of marriage and start a completely new relationship publicly. Priscilla finds it difficult to accept Lakshman's decision in favour of his family and social convenience ignoring her deep love for and commitment to him and naturally as an libertarian (individualist) feminist she bursts out stressing the legitimacy of emotional love over physical love:

I love you with all my heart and soul, but I don't want a relationship with a man who doesn't feel the same way as I do. I want a man who loves me and a relationship where I can rely on the fact that he loves me. Not my body, not my embrace, ME. (207) You're so good at understanding everyone else's claims on you – your family's, your daughter's, your job's. Do I have a claim on you, Lucky? Am I just a convenient outlet for your passion, your escape from humdrum reality? (p. 207)

Priscilla undertakes several existential issues, like the conflict between the existential need and social expectations. Lakshman, though deeply in love with Priscilla Hart, refuses to go with her as he finds it difficult to ignore his social and ethical values inculcated in him from his early childhood. Conversely, for Priscilla, her feeling of love is her whole existence. Naturally, she feels cheated and gives vent to her anger very strongly:

I have given up the carefully circumscribed order of my life, with its assumptions, its compromises, its predictabilities. I've given up the sense a Brahmin strives all his life to attain, the sense of being anchored to the world. Loving you, I'm adrift. Everything around me is turbulence. I don't know whether I'll sail to a new and sunny paradise with you or crash foundering on the rocks. (p. 216)

Perhaps falling in love is a luxury for Lakshman, whereas Priscilla considers it as risking her whole life:

You haven't taken a risk in this relationship. At all. But I have. It was my risk to take, to fall in love with a married man, and I did. I am crying as I write this. But I don't want you to feel sorry for me. I want your love, not your pity. (207)

A woman who's available at your convenience, two evenings a week. you don't have to give up anything. Your work, your social life, your family, your official commitments. You have it all, including me.(214-15)

Here Priscilla appears to be negotiating for a reconstruction and performance of a new identity of Lakshman which needs to be fair and just in his mutual relationship with her even if it is at odds with his own socio-cultural milieu.

We also witness her helplessness in not approaching Lakshman whenever she feels like approaching him as he is a senior civil servant and therefore cannot express even her feelings as per her convenience:

Do you know what it's like to have a man you can't speak to when you need him? To feel the ache of needing you and knowing you're beyond reach? To not be able to acknowledge you in public, not to go out openly together, not to be able to see you across a crowded room and know that we belong together.(p. 216)

To an existentialist, she may appear to be a weak character, as she lives in a predetermined world; she is not free to realize her goals, and to translate her dreams into realities. Existentialists observe that a human being is free to do whatever he pleases. But this is not true always. A human being, to a large extent, is the outcome of his/her own socio-cultural ethos. Her/His being in the world is something s/he had no choice or little choice over. In the case of Priscilla there are situations where she does not have any control – for instance, she falls in love with

a senior and married bureaucrat as she has been interacting with him regularly on various issues related to her project in India.

If we take the other perspective of the story, Priscilla wants the man in spite of all odds, such as in spite of his married status and being a proud father of a daughter. All these details simply do not carry any meaning for her and she utters the following to Lakshman: 'I don't care about your background ... I love you' (p. 89). In fact, several topics that are normally taken as taboos, like extramarital affairs etc in Indian culture, do not even cause Priscilla to raise her eyebrow. To illustrate, she perceives sex as a means of expressing love to the man she loves. So she is totally unfazed by the fact that she has already enjoyed several dates and sexual encounters with Lakshman.

Further, Priscilla questions the very foundation of the traditional Indian marriage system where the elders of the family map out and arrange the marriage of their grown-up adult children. She is unable to swallow this marriage as the lifetime commitment between a boy and a girl. She is more shocked to accept this kind of marriage in the case of Lakshman who is highly educated and quite liberal in his philosophy of life. Even Lakshman is not very happy with this kind of marriage, as he does not find an intellectual compatibility with his wife. He finds a great level of compatibility with Priscilla but he does not feel bold enough to come out of the niche of traditional marriage and declare to the whole world that she is a better, more fulfilling and satisfying match for him. In

this situation, she finds herself just an instrument to keep him in good humor and mood without getting any mileage in his life. At times she feels pity on him and labels him as 'Mr Right in the wrong place at the wrong time' (p. 69). This highly significant comment reflects how the construction of social identities in inter-personal relationship is at odds in Indian and Western cultures. Naturally, he is helpless to challenge the marriage imposed upon him by society and this leads to the estrangement in their relationship, though she, as a radical feminist, highlights even a man's predicament in Indian setting:

... I saw so much Lucky, a good man in bad marriage, someone capable of love who had no opportunity to love until I came along, a man who had not seen his own happiness fully until he met me. With me I think he realized for the first time that he hadn't truly known love in his life and that he could find happiness, loving and being loved happiness, of course, at a price. A price that in the end he was not prepared – with his upbringing, his sense of his responsibilities, his inability to escape from Indian society. (p. 241)

This also brings to the surface some of the so-called social taboos, like sex for discussion in a very bold way as sex also plays a vital role in bringing this civil servant closer to the foreign researcher. Geetha, Lakshman's wife, has a different attitude towards sex. She just takes it as a routine chore where she does not want to initiate or welcome it in any way; she just wants to remain a passive partner. Patil (2007:83) also feels she (Geetha) is born to endure it rather than enjoy it. On the other hand, Priscilla enjoys every moment of it as sex is a great festivity and celebration for her. Therefore to achieve a heightened sense of pleasure,

she initiates it, welcomes it and looks forward to every other step with a great expectation and fulfillment. Priscilla's these viewpoints about sex bring Lakshman closer to her but ultimately his social face wins over his personal and existential faces and he decides to end the relationship. All these details point to the fact that Indian characters have not been able to construct such identities which could give a front seat to the emotional aspect of inter-personal relationship rather than to a social institution, like marriage. Priscilla cannot swallow his decision to stick to the same loveless marriage:

Here I am, on Independence Day, wanting to give up my independence for him, knowing he has to win his own independence first. I can't believe he's even hesitating to leave loveless marriage he hates for the woman he says he loves. (p. 199)

Priscilla is always lost because of his double standards and feels that perhaps it is a part of Indian culture. She finds even Holy Scripture supporting her point and sounds like a great radical feminist:

Learned something interesting about the Hindu god, Ram the one all fuss is about these days. Seems that when he brought his wife back from Lanka and became king, the gossips in the kingdom were whispering that after so many months in Ravan's captivity, she could not possibly be chaste anymore. So to stop the tongues wagging, he subjugated her to agni-pariksha, a public ordeal by fire, to prove her innocent. She walked through unscathed. A certified pure woman. (p. 63)

She further continues:

That stopped the gossip for a while, but before long the old rumours surfaced again. It was beginning to affect Ram's credibility as king. So, he spoke to her about it. What could she do? She willed the earth to open up, literally and swallowed her. That was the end of the gossip. Ram lost the woman he had warred

to win back, but he ruled on as a wise and beloved king. What the hell does this say about India? Appearances are more potent than truths. Loyalty is all one way from the woman to the man. And when society stacks up all the odds against a woman, she'd better not count on the man's support. She has no way out than to end her own life. (p. 63)

Thus, she is full of regret for having an affair with the civil servant: 'And I am in love with an Indian. I must be crazy.' (p. 63). Naturally, these observations speak volumes about women's status in India even towards the end of 20th century.

Related to the dichotomy of standards in Indian society is the dichotomy between the scientific facts and public opinion which is the result of the compulsions of socio-cultural ideologies. She is shocked to find that even now ordinary people believe that a lady is responsible for the birth of a girl or a boy not the gentleman. Besides, on occasions, her value is decided by the fact if she has been able to deliver a male child in the family. Priscilla brings forward Sundari's case. Sundari is rebuked often by her mother-in-law for not delivering a male child. Implicitly, a girl child is a curse and a boy is considered, more often, a boon. Sundari, who is brought to hospital with 75% burns and in her feeble voice, narrates the circumstances leading to the severe burns. She could not bring the expected dowry from her parents. Besides, 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. Through Sundari, Tharoor

experiences the trauma and pangs of the evil of dowry. Kadambri calls it our major concern:

That is the real issue, for women in India. Not population control, but violence against women, in our own homes. (p. 249)

Patil (2007:100) appears justified in saying that ‘his (Tharoor’s) writing records a seismograph of pressures and tremors that our society is facing at the moment.’

In summing up, it may be observed that Priscilla Hart tries to assert as an existentialist and analyse social constructions of gender and sexuality and highlight gender inequality, gender politics, and power relations in great length. To achieve her objectives, she has been found to campaign on issues such as reproductive rights, domestic violence, discrimination, stereotyping and oppression of various types and degrees. Further, she often seems to cross boundaries based on social class, culture and religion. So, supposedly, she appears a very robust feminist changing her tones between a radical and individualist (libertarian) feminist depending on the issues and situations. Finally, what sounds great about her feminism is her constantly stressing the fact that these deprived and less- privileged women have the right to enough information to make informed choices about their social and personal lives which could be seen as her plea for Indian women and also men to construct and perform new identities in new lights which are more democratic and fairer.

- Akram, Tanweer (nd)** “The Philosophy of Existentialism,” Online.
<http://www.Columbia.edu/~ta63/exist.htm>. p.1. Accessed on 19 Nov 2002.
- Henry, Kathy. 2007.** “What is Feminism,” online.
<http://www.yoursdaily.com>. p. 2. Accessed on 9 September 2008.
- Huxley, Aldous (ed)** (1932) *The Letters of D H Lawrence*. London: Heinemann. p 198.
- Menon, Bindu. (2001)** “Ladies Coupe was harder to Write: An Interview,” Online. <http://www.anitanair.net/pages/articles-lc-ht.htm>. p. 1. Accessed on 21 Oct 2006.
- Patil, Geeta, M.** (2007) *Shashi Tharoor: His Vision and Art*. New Delhi: Creative Books.
- Tharoor, Shashi.** (2001) “The Shashi Tharoor Column : A departure fictionally,” *The Hindu*, Sunday September 6, 2001. On line. <http://www.hinduonnet.com/thehindu/2001/09/16/stories/13160675.html> . Accessed on 19.11.2007.
- Wiesel, Elie. (2001)** ‘Shashi Tharoor.’ Online. <http://www.emalayali.com/a6news.htm> Accessed on 19.11.2007

The writer is indebted to Dr V S Thakur, Assistant Professor of English, Dhofar University, Salalah, Oman for his valuable suggestions in developing this article.

**Dr Amrendra Sharma,
Asst Prof of Linguistics,
Dhofar University, Salalah, Oman**
(amrendras@yahoo.com)