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In Pursuit of Secularism: Religious and Political Complexity in Selected Works of Shashi Tharoor

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Abstract

The term secularism means separate from religion or having no religious basis. It indicates to what the dissociation of religion from political economic social and cultural aspects of life. It advocates the equal opportunities for the follower of all religion. Sanatan Dharma (Hinduism) believes in the holistic and comprehensive religious belief and trying to integrate them. The term related to the Vedic concept of Dharmnirpeksh (the indifference of state to religion) and the Vedic philosophy Sarv Dharm Sambhava (the destination of all part follower of all religion is same). In Indian constitution the word 'secular' is added by making forty-second amendment act in 1976 with a belief of equality and equal protection to all community. In the other hand, it has taken the power to interfere in religion so as remove evils in it such as dowry system, child marriage, triple talaq, uniform civil code, CAA, law of overpopulation control act etc. In India there are mainly two perspectives regarding Secularism. One perspective related to the views of Mahatma Gandhi. The followers of these views accept that secularism in India can only be possible with an adoption of pluralism by every Indian citizen. The other perspective related to the views of Sangh Parivar. The followers of this view accepted that the secularism is western concept that is not suitable for the Indian context and must be replaced with cultural nationalism.

Keyword- Secularism, Pluralism, Agnostic, Liberalism, Dogma, Mythology, Comprehensive

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Shashi Tharoor, Indian politician and writer, is born in 1956 in London. He got his primary and secondary education in Kolkata and graduation from St Stephen College, Delhi in 1975. He holds PhD from Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at the Tufts University. He was formerly under Secretary General of the United Nation from 1996 to 2007 and contested for post of Secretary General in 2006. He has been serving the Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala since 2009. Shashi Tharoor has written numerous books in English centred on the Indian themes of cultural religion and Indo- nostalgic history. The works of him beautifully presents the religious crisis and way pursuit of secularism in his more selected novels. Through such novel he tries to elaborate the conceptual way of following religion and visions of truth of it. In his novel *Riot: A Novel* Shashi Tharoor presents religious complexity and its fatal result. The story of novel is centred to the murder of Priscilla Hart, twenty-four year old American student. She came to work in a small town of India but unfortunately murdered in the town of Zalilgarh at Utter Pradesh during communal right. Her parents, who are divorced, travel to India and try to know the reason of riot. The past life of Priscilla Hart is also part of the novel. Her past life provides a special role to understand the character and motives of her life. The story of the novels takes slow start with the interrogation of her (Priscilla) murder. The events of the story associated with Babri Masjid conflict and a love story of cross-cultural beings. The novel published in two different cover pages to instruct the audience or reader of different path followers. The novel first published in UK with the title ' *Riot: A Novel*' and latter it published with the title *Riot: A Love Story* 'in America. In India cover pages depict the image of communal right, sense of hate and disharmony whereas in America the cover pages depict the pleasant memory of unsuccessful love affair. The whole novel is in the form of general, diary, interview, series of report and poem expressed by the character. It is divided into seventy-eight section as a documentary. Being a love story between idealist American girl Prescilla Hart and Indian administrator Lakshman of zalilgarh, Uttar Pradesh, has the essence and complexity of communal riot. Priscilla Hart, the central character of the novel, is volunteered in India and came from America. She entangles in love affair with a handsome man Lakshman and unfortunately become prey of communal riot of Babri Masjid controversy. Being married Lakshman make a close relationship with her (Priscilla). Geeta, wife of Lakshman, is a picture of traditional Indian women. She is both religious and superstitious also. As she finds

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the news that her husband chosen to move to United State with Priscilla, she goes to the temple of Lord Shiva to seek the help of Swamiji. She prays:

Yesterday my husband's friend Gurinder told me..... my husband having an affair with an woman. I cannot talk to him about this. It would kill me if I had to kill him what I knew. I can only turn to God, Swamiji, and to you. Please conduct a special pooja for me to help me keep my husband. (Tharoor 227)

Riot is a novel of complexity with multiple themes. There is conflict between American culture versus Indian culture, sexual love and duty centred love, secular strand of Indian culture versus extremist strand of Indian culture, religion of Hindu versus religion of Muslims. Shashi Tharoor beautifully touches the sensitive issues as the controversy of Hindu and Muslim religion. The book portrays the actual situation of India. It narrates a lot of information related to the history and indicates towards the way of national peace. The book explores information related to the result of communal riot. During riot, it is not just Hindu and Muslim community affected but the life of innocence also get disturb. A notable character of the novel *Riot* Mr. Gupta supports the construction of Ram Mandir at Ayodhya. He advocates:

In Ayodhya, there are many temples to Lord Rama. But the most famous temple is not really a temple anymore of Ram Janm Bhumi, the birthplace of Lord Rama.....a olden days a great temple stood there and pilgrims from all over India would come worship Lord Rama there. But a Muslim emperor Babar, a foreigner from Central Asia, knocked down and its place he build a a big masque which was named after him, the Babri Masjid. (122-3)

Shashi tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is one of the remarkable Indian epical novel. The novel reflects the mythological story of Hindu epic Mahabharata. He tries to transform the perspective of this mythological epic into the modern Indian politics. The novel divided into eighteen chapters and runs with the description Indian political freedom struggle. Tharoor translating the title of Mahabharat ('Maha' means great and 'Bharat' means India) in this novel. He enhances Indian cultural identity through his novel with the reflection of pluralism and India's multi-colored He recasts and resets the context of Mahabharata to interpret reality of Indian independence movement and the first three decade of the post independence up through the 1980s. The formatted sections of the novel mirror the

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perspective of Mahabharata. The eighteen chapters of Mahabharata based on the eighteen days Battle of Kurukshetra. The name of these section of the book are; The Twice Born Tale, The Duel With The Crown, The Rain Came, A Raj Quartets, The Power of Silence, The Forbidden Fruit, The Sun Also Rises, The Midnight Parents, The Far-Power Villain, The Darkness At The Dawn, The Bed of Arrow, The Man Who Could Not Be A King, Passage Through India, The Rig Veda, Act of Free Choice, The Bangle Book or The Reign of Error, The Drop of Honey, The Path of Salvation etc. The novel runs like an allegorical story where one can relate this epic with the history of past century India .The eleventh chapter of the novel *The great Indian novel*, is a compact and authentic portrait of Bhishm Pitamah. This chapter entitled the bed of arrow. Bhishm Pitamah takes an oath and prefers to live a life of celibacy throughout his life. But this decision of oath is sacrifice to maintain his father's happiness. Shashi Tharoor presents Bhishma as Mahatma Gandhi in the context of political history of modern India. The celibacy of Bhishma is compare to the non-violence of Mahatma Gandhi in the novel. To him, Gandhiji fail to take the right decision in the partition of the India as he himself remained aloof at that historical time. The inactive role of Mahatma Gandhi at the time of partition is compared with the passive role of Bhishma in kurukshetra. Seeing the helplessness and inactive role of Mahatma Gandhi during the partition Tharoor opines:

You make me sick, Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive and barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking others reptiles egg and in fertile old fool... a man who is less than a woman. Tragedy of country springs from you. (232)

The sixteenth section of the novel is the act of free choice. In this section, Tharoor narrates the story of Draupadi and her choice for suitable husband. She chooses Arjuna but kunti, mother of Pandavas, instructions Pandavas to share equally the 'surprise' as they brought her home. The relation of Draupadi with five Pandavas as compared to the relation of Georgiana Mountbatten with Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru, the first prime minister of India. In the novel, Gandhari is presented as a girl of lustrous eye of Allahabad, Kamla Nehru. Bhishmaji selects her for Dritrastra. Kunti,mother of pandvas is represented as a beautiful girl known across the country for her glorious beauty. Shashi Tharoor presents her in modern garb:

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She was seated in the living room half smoked Turkish cigarettes overflowing from a nearby ashtray whose silver colour matched tint of the hair at the temples. Her Banarasi saree, Bombay nails, Bangalore sandals; Bareilly bangles all advertised her fabled elegance betrayal only by the strain at the corner of his red eyes and by the quick darting puffs. She took through her Ivory cigarettes holder. (Tharoor 265-6)

Shashi tharoor another important book *why I am a Hindu* is a remarkable and self expressive philosophical essay. The book is divided into three sections. The first section of the book is entitled *My Hinduism* second *Political Hinduism* and the last and final '*Taking back Hinduism*'. The whole book advocates against the communalization of Hinduism into Hindutva. The first section of the book *My Hinduism* presents the aspects of religion and its chief questionable practices in current Indian society. The second section of the book *Political Hinduism* explains the art and techniques of political leader and their hijack the faith to utilize the fulfilment of their aim. The third section of the book '*Taking Back Hinduism*' explains the way how one might free Religion from the excesses and perversions of Hinduism into Hindutva and restore its real essence for 21st century world.

In the preface of the book *Why I am Hindu* Shashi Tharoor clears the objectives and thought behind the production of this book. He accepts that he has felt intolerance in the country because of the communalization of Hinduism into Hindutva. To him, the current government has created a religious agenda accepting itself the chief authority of Hindu religion and the well-wisher of Hindu mythology. Shashi Tharoor accepts that he has written this book to express the proper perspective of making neutral the communalization of Hindutva by ruling current government. He expresses the perspective of the book, "I wrote this book to show that the intolerance and violent form of hindutva that begin to impose themselves on the public consciousness of the Indian in 1980s went against the spirit of Hinduism that most plural, inclusive and expensive of the faith"(8).

Shashi Tharoor is a deep thinker of the Indian religion and cultural philosophy. His thought is centred to the liberal aspects of Hinduism. He writes that Hinduism is the inclusive culture ethos not the religious dogma. He seems to prove that religion or religious belief is a individual relation between the worshipper and whatever image of his maker (God), he choose to worship. It is not a thought or order to impose on others. In the first section of the

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book 'My Hinduism he tries to prove the liberal aspect of Hindu religion taking the example of his father's faith and way of worshipping God. He States:

Every morning after his bath my father would stand in front of the prayer room wrapped in the towel. His wet hair is still uncombed and chant his mantras. But he never obliged me to join him. He exemplified The Hindu ideas that the religion is an intensely personal matter, that prayer is between you and whatever image of your maker you choose to worship. In the Hindu, way, I was to find my own truth. (16)

The thought of Shashi Tharoor seems to deviate from Hindu ideology and faith in God. He tries to seek the meaning in every action perform in worship God. He searches science all the aspect of religious belief to create a boundary line between Hindu religious belief, Hinduism and Hindutva. In the first section of the book my Hinduism he forcefully presents the ideology of liberalism with clear confidence. He argues that Hinduism is Indianness and cultural essence. Hinduism presents inclusive sense of Indian civilization with the faith of social virtues. To him Hinduism is not a dogma or orientation of a special rule. The ideology of him is clear support of Pandit Jawahar Lal Nehru's, the first prime minister of India, agnostic theory of Indian culture. He forcefully puts the thought of differentiation between dogma and faith. In his book *why I am Hindu*, he states his statement to clarify the thought of secularism pointing the difference between Hinduism and dogma. He States:

Hinduism is civilization not a dogma. There is no such thing as a Hindu heresy. Hinduism is a faith that allowing each believer to stretch his or her imagination to a personal notion of the creation good head of divinity. Hinduism is also a faith that uniquely does not have any notion of heresy in it: you cannot be Hindu hectic because there is no standard set of dogma from which you can deviate that make you hectic. (21)

The book *why I am Hindu* is an essay written to make understand and get the real flavours of Hinduism. It is not mere book but an opportunity to understand the basic and fundamental ethics of Hinduism. Shashi Tharoor tries his best to create a communal peace balancing the political journey and religious ethics. He seems to create a new meaning of secularism and liberalism as dictionary provides. The creation of new and changed meaning of some degree of secularism is basic need for the richness Indian nationality. He tries his best to create a climate of nationality putting aside the religious dogma.

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Finally, Shashi Tharoor is a thinker of Indianness and gives the unique argument for the richness of it. His Hinduism is agnostic. It is representation of Indian civilization. To him the soul of Hinduism is inclusive and liberal thinking for religion of all community. He seems politicize the Hinduism telling it different from Hindutva. In an interview he advocated "Hinduism is inclusive religion where as hindutva is political doctrine that is actually exclusive. Seeing the plot and story of his novels *Riot* and *The Great Indian Novel* and essay 'Why I am Hindu', it seems that Tharoor has a great love for Indian mythology, Hindu culture and its spiritual ethics. But when we make a comparison between his literary works and political interview, we find a complexity in the clarity of his thought. For example in his novel *Riot*, he claims that "Ram Janmabhoomi is the birthplace of Lord Rama. But Muslim emperor Babar, a foreigner, knocked down and its place he built a big masque." But when the Ram Janmabhoomi case was in trial, he expresses his thought in secular way in interview, "no good Hindu would want to it (Temple) to be built by destroying and others place of worship." Such complexity of his thought generally comes in front of us. But views of religious and political complexity are formed by him to create peace harmony and secular atmosphere in between the people of different community. Through these unique ideologies, he tries to create a secular atmosphere and flourish his political career.

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