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Secularism and Its Discontents: The Moor's Last Sigh and Riot

The recurrent theme of dropping frontiers in a world which has become increasingly heterogeneous but intolerant is the leitmotif of Sashi Tharoor's *Riot* and Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh*. The figure of the Moor and his hybrid genealogy is central to Rushdie's vision, as he reconstructs a syncretic, tolerant Moorish Spain and juxtaposes it with Bombay, his haven of pluralism. He celebrates Nehru's vision of a new Indian nation which, in keeping with the traditions of western modernity, promised to be above religion, clan, and narrow parochial considerations.

With the vanishing of such ideals and hopes, as boundaries and religious communalism are getting intensified these diasporic cosmopolitan writers make a case for a boundless world. Their response is a human subjectivity which transcends color, class, narrow parochialism, tribalism and fundamentalism. Secularism is the very base of their humane approach. This essay, therefore, analyzes the theme of secularism and its discontents, particularly in the context of the coexistence of Hindus and Muslims in India, as it runs through Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* and Tharoor's *Riot* by exploring the various layers of allegories related to pluralism and the critique of fundamentalism in them. Toward this end, it will focus on the recent debates on Indian secularism by scholars to interrogate the relevance of the European model of secularism which argues for the separation of state and religion.

key words: Secularism, Salman Rushdie, *The Moor's Last Sigh*, Sashi Tharoor, State and Religion

Salman Rushdie's *The Moor's Last Sigh* (1995), and Shashi Tharoor's *Riot* (2001) share a common ground in espousing the theme of pluralism in contemporary India, particularly in the context of the coexistence of people belonging to different religions, as they set their narratives in its eventful moments against the backdrop of the rise and expansion of the militant Hindu right and its fascistic ambitions. Rushdie's multi-cultural and multi-religious palimpsest – Bombay, which he reveres as “O Bombay! Prima in Indis! Gateway to India! Star of the East with her face to the west!” (*Moor's Last Sigh* 372), is violently destroyed and its communal amity shattered by the protracted and vicious riots after the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1993 by the fanatic Hindu right volunteers acting on the insidious designs of their leaders.

Bombay, the microcosm of the Nehruvian promise of secularism, is bombed and blown apart. As Rushdie bemoans, “the idealisms, the innocence, of the first post-Independence age had been blown away, perhaps forever” (*Step Across* 162). The lamentation seen in *The Moor's Last Sigh* on the erosion and destruction of pluralism runs through *Riot* as well. Shashi Tharoor sets his narrative amidst the events leading to the mammoth procession of the Hindu right volunteers, with the consecrated bricks for the Ram temple, to be built at the disputed site of the sixteenth century Babri Masjid in 1989. As the tragic and misplaced love story of Priscilla with India, and with the much married and conservative District Magistrate Lakshman, unfolds amidst this

turbulence, Tharoor seductively transports us to the nostalgic past and the secular times of Ghazi Miyan and its “composite religiosity.” Lakshman echoes this vision of multi-cultural democracy and pluralism when he tells Priscilla how India “has belied every doomsayer who’s predicted its imminent disintegration” (Tharoor 44), and how it has overcome the divides of language, region, caste, class, and religion through its “resilient democracy.” However, he does not want to romanticize:

Do I make it sound too easy? Believe me, it isn’t. Skulls have been broken over each of these issues. But the basic principle is simple indeed. Let everyone feel they are as much Indian as everyone else: that is the secret. Ensure that democracy protects the multiple identities of Indians, so that people feel you can be a good Muslim and a good Bihari and a good Indian all at once. It’s worked Priscilla. We have given passports to a dream, a dream of an extraordinary, polyglot, polychrome, polyconfessional country. (Tharoor 44-45)

As he expresses a rare optimism that democracy will solve all the problems and fill all the chasms of disaffections to the receptive Priscilla in the ambience of the Zalilgarh Kothli, which later becomes their regular rendezvous, he is suddenly overcome by the immediate reality and wonders: “But who, in all of this, allowed for militant Hinduism to arise, challenging the very basis of the Indianness I’ve just described to you?” (45). Rushdie’s model of western secularism, with its wall of separation between religion and politics, is different from the secularism advocated by Tharoor, which is not opposed to religion. Tharoor advocates for a religiously tolerant model as he expresses in the words of his protagonist Lakshman: “How can such a religion [i.e. Hinduism] lend itself to ‘fundamentalism’? That devotees of this essentially tolerant faith want to desecrate a shrine, that they’re going around assaulting Muslims in its name, is to me a source of shame and sorrow” (144-45).

Rushdie’s protagonist is significantly different. The narrative of *The Moor's Last Sigh* revolves around Moraes Zogoiby aka Moor, the last descendant of a Portuguese merchant family. Moor’s life mirrors that of his author as he too was born in Bombay, his restricted movement due to imprisonment recalling Rushdie’s plight under fatwa after *The Satanic Verses* (1988) when he was writing this novel. Moor recounts his epic tale through the fortunes of his family by focusing on colorful characters like his artist mother Aurora and his lover, the mentally unstable sculptor Uma. Rushdie’s lamentation for the lost possibilities of secularism in India which he signifies through the Moors of Spain become clear as the narrative of Moor’s family transposes us to spaces in Bombay, Cochin and the Alhambra like fort in rural Spain, and is juxtaposed with key events from Indian history, like the Partition, Emergency, and the rise of the Hindu fundamentalist outfits like the Shiv Sena in Bombay.

As boundaries and religious communalism are getting intensified these diasporic cosmopolitan writers make a case for a boundless world. Their response is a human subjectivity that transcends color, class, clan, narrow parochialism, tribalism and fundamentalism. Secularism is the very base of their humane approach. In my essay, therefore, I would analyze the theme of secularism as it runs through Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Moor's Last Sigh*, and I shall emphasize the various layers of allegories related to secularism and pluralism in it. My reading of secularism will also focus on Rushdie’s attitude towards religion as reflected in the various characters of *The Moor's Last Sigh*. I shall study the role of religion and secularism in Tharoor’s *Riot* in the context of the tolerant religiosity of Lakshman, and use the recent debates on Indian secularism by scholars to interrogate the contemporary relevance of the European model of secularism without any compromise, which retains the total bifurcation of politics and religion.

Secularism in *The Moor's Last Sigh*

The recurrent theme of dropping frontiers in a world which has become increasingly heterogeneous and intolerant is the leitmotif of both *Riot* and *The Moor's Last Sigh*. In the latter work, the figure of the Moor, his hybrid genealogy, who in the author's hybrid words is a "a jewholic anonymous, a cathjewnut, a stewpot, a mongrel cur" (*Moor's Last Sigh* 104), is very central to Rushdie's vision, as he reconstructs a syncretic, tolerant Moorish Spain and juxtaposes it with Bombay, his haven of pluralism. He celebrates Nehru's vision of a new Indian nation which, in keeping with the traditions of western modernity, promised to be above religion, clan, and narrow parochial considerations. He sees in this vision the fulfilment of his own desire for a tolerant plural world: early on in the novel, grandfather Camoens whispers hopefully to his wife "about the dawning of a new world, Belle, a free country, Belle, above religion because secular, above class because socialist, above caste because enlightened above hatred because loving" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 51).

Moor's body is "a semi-allegory," for the metropolis: "Like the city itself, Bombay of my joys and sorrows, I mushroomed into a huge urbane sprawl of a fellow" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 161). Therefore its decay indicates the erosion of the values of pluralism and diversity, and along with it the erosion of its macrocosm – the Nehruvian idea of the modern secular Indian nation. Moor paintings by Aurora play an essential role in the narrative to map the trajectory of secularism and religious pluralism, the early Moor Paintings signifying the origination of a nation from varied cultural and religious ethnicities and its optimistic syncretism. Aurora's "Dark Moor" paintings, however, underscore the later pessimism when Bombay is destroyed and Sultan Boadbil of Granada has his last sigh looking back at Alhambra, his fortress-palace, the "last and greatest of all the Moor's fortifications" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 80), before leaving Spain for ever.

Bombay and Alhambra are the spaces of hybridity from where the Moor and Sultan are forced to move out at the point of their ruin or exile. The evil of religion destroys Rushdie's pluralistic dream. Rushdie's hatred for religion is conspicuous. What Judaism means to Moor is left ambiguous but that he owes no allegiance to it is emphasized, as he confesses "in a country where all citizens owe an instinctive dual allegiance to a place and faith, I had been made into a nowhere-and-no-community man – and proud of it, may I say" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 336). As Moor and his mother Aurora suffer from loss of faith, he refers to religion as a disease and asserts, "by some great fluke that seemed at the time the most ordinary thing in my world, my parents had been cured of religion" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 55). When commenting on her painting entitled *A Light to Lighten the Darkness*, a "mythomaniac" gem, Aurora asserts "I am getting interested in making religious pictures for people who have no god" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 220).

Writing about Gujarat carnage in "March 2002: God in Gujarat" Rushdie notes, "so India's problem turns out to be the world's problem. What happened in India, happened in God's name. The problem's name is God" (*Step Across* 346). In his opinion "[t]he fundamentalist seeks to bring down a great deal more than buildings. Such people are against, to offer just a brief list, freedom of speech, a multi-party political system, universal adult suffrage, accountable government, Jews, homosexuals, women's rights, pluralism, secularism, short skirts, dancing, beardlessness, evolution theory, sex. There are tyrants, not Muslims" (*Step Across* 348). But secularism tops the list: "We should understand that secularism is now the fanatics' Enemy Number one, and its most important target. Why? Because secularism demands a total separation

between Church and State” (Rushdie, *Step Across* 238-39). Rushdie’s stand on religion as a dogma is uncompromising. No wonder the name Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru plays such an important role in *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as it is synonymous with the kind of secularism Rushdie aspires for. As quoted by Deshmukh, “[i]n a press conference held on October 12, 1947, Pandit Nehru made his stance against communalism very clear: ‘We can only think of [a] secular non communal democratic state, in which every individual to whatever religion he may belong, has equal rights and opportunities’” (66). Nehru’s vision of nationalism was never narrow, as he further assures: “In such an India, communalism, separatism, isolation, untouchability, bigotry and exploitation of man by man has no place, and while religion is free, it is not allowed to interfere with the political and economic aspects of a nation’s life” (qtd. in Deshmukh 74).

In a typical Rushdiesque style Moor’s body lends itself to multiple levels of allegories, without lending itself easily to total allegorization. If Moor’s body symbolizes the nation, his withered right hand can be read as epitomizing Rushdie’s own condition at the time of writing: “Sometimes I stayed in uncomfortable houses. Sometimes I had no more than a small room in which I could not approach the window lest I be seen from below. Sometimes I was able to get out a bit. At other times I had trouble doing so” (*Step Across* 219). In a paradoxical relationship between art and life, the high priest of boundless cosmopolitan secularism is imprisoned by the most parochial forces of religion. As an alternative reading, in Moor we can find a smaller thread of allegory to secularism itself. If the acceleration in his growth started only after his birth, then Moor could be conjectured to be the son of Pandit Nehru himself: “Nine months before I was born, Aurora Zogoiby travelled to Delhi to receive, from the President’s hands and in the presence of her good friend the Prime Minister, a State Award – the so-called ‘Esteemed Lotus’ – for her services to the arts” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 175).

Secularism as Nehru’s child and its iconic representation Bombay, are collapsed in this statement:

I expanded without time for proper planning, without any pauses to learn from my experiences or my mistakes or my contemporaries, without time for reflection. How then could I have turned out to be any thing but a mess? Much that was corruptible in me has been corrupted; much that was perfectible, but also capable of being demolished, has been lost. (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 161-62)

In the post-colonial India, as the pre-independent, tolerant, pluralistic past gave way to the Nehruvian idea of modernity and socialism, the nation grew and expanded like the Moor’s body at an accelerated pace without reflection and foresight, enabling the material and spiritual corruption of the nation, thereby destroying the Nehruvian promise of secularism, which guaranteed all citizens equal rights and opportunities, freedom of religion, and bifurcation of politics from religion in the governance of the state. Rushdie in his trenchant satiric style vents his ire on Nehru for letting this happen in Vasco’s words: “Circular sexualist India my foot . . . Panditji sold you that stuff like a cheap watch salesman and you all bought one and now you wonder why it doesn’t work . . . Only one power in this damn country is strong enough to stand up against those gods and it isn’t blankety blank sockular specialism . . . I’ll tell you what it is. Corruption” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 166). Rushdie does not leave Nehru’s rose either: As Ina’s bridal bouquet of yellow roses gets crushed against her chest, “[i]ts thorns had pricked her bosom until it bled. My sister was unmoved by such secularist excuses” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 214). Ire takes on the form of “Nayi Badmashi [/new mischief] – with which Vasco would afterwards make his name . . . [H]e even made a short film called *Kutta Kashmir ka* (‘A Kashmiri’ – rather than Andalusian-‘Dog’)” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 154). Rushdie’s love-

hate relationship with Nehru takes on a Kashmiri angle – the roots which he shares with Nehru. Nehru's assurances of a secular nation failed because they made "plenty of noise but didn't draw much blood" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 103).

Thus as Rushdie is taking on Nehru and his idea of the secular nation-state of India, which seems to falter from its original idea of secularism as defending its overall pluralism, an ominous fate befalls secularism itself. After Indira Gandhi's emergency of the late seventies, Uma, "Indian art's new star – young beautiful, and driven by her strong religious faith" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 262), symbolizing the rising Hindu right and its insidious designs of cultural homogenization, entices Moor and he falls in love with her. Moor's blind passionate craving for Uma is similar to the cravings of the congress party of the post Nehruvian era, when it forged eager coalitions with sectarian parties compromising the ideals of the nation for fulfilling its selfish greed, even when it was aware of the capacity of extremists in the coalition to distort and reinvent their own history to destroy the very fundamentals of secularism. Moor is obstinate in his love for Uma though detective Dom Minto warns him "that she had on three occasions agreed to take heavy mental medication intended to control her repeated mental aberrations [when] she would invent long, elaborate personal histories of great vividness, and would cling to them obstinately, even when confronted with internal contradictions in her rigmarales; or with the truth" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 265-66). This tragic obsession with Uma without reflection leads to Moor's downfall as he is implicated in her death and has to take cover under Raman Fielding, the Hindu fundamentalist who by his organized orchestration of violence destroys Bombay. Finally, Moor kills Fielding and is forced to leave Bombay. Secularism is thus totally finished, as its icon is destroyed and its embodiment banished.

Debates on Secularism, Religion and *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Indian economist and philosopher Amartya Sen agrees, in his essay "Secularism and Its Discontents," that there are problems involved in secularism regarding the symmetrical treatment of different religions and communities. But these issues, he argues, can be addressed within the framework of and commitment to secularism. Abandoning it will only lead to more complicated problems (Sen *passim*). However, the social theorist and political psychologist Ashis Nandy argues for abandoning the project of secularism altogether. He proclaims: "I am not a secularist. In fact, I can be called an anti-secularist" (326). The European model of secularism is ill suited to India and the wall of separation between ideology, religion and politics has exhausted its possibilities, as the vast majority of Indians understand its meaning as equal respect for all religions. Therefore, in the Indian context, an appropriate model has to be recuperated from the Indian ethos of pre-modern religious tolerance and coexistence as exemplified by Gandhi in his tolerant all inclusive religiosity and anti-modern approach (321-45).

Rushdie rues over the wasted possibilities offered by secularism, but a Gandhian model does not offer much hope to him either: Cameons narrates to Belle his experience of having gone to Malgudi to listen to Mahatma Gandhi, "I had seen India's beauty in that crowd with its soda-water and cucumber but with that God stuff [i.e. when the crowd chanted with Mahatma his favourite Raghupati Raghava] I got scared. In the city we are for secular India but the village is for Ram. And they say Ishwar and Allah is your name but they don't mean it . . . In the end I'm afraid the villagers will march on the city and people like us will have to lock our doors and there will come a Battering Ram" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 55-56). Rushdie does not allow any scope for religious accommodation as the fear of majoritarian appropriation is overwhelming in

any such theorizing. Even as he longs for the pre independent/ partition religious pluralism and revels in its multi-culturalism, religion as such portends evil for him. “Then keep a ticket to London in your pocket,” Vasco Miranda advises Aurora “[b]ecause in this god-rotten joint, you never know when you might have to run” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 221). But as it turns out Aurora is not so lucky. Rushdie uses the frenetic atmosphere of the *Ganesh Chaturthi* celebrations as appropriated by the Hindu fundamentalists to forebode her death, as she dances away mocking the perversity of the mob. The lethal combination of religion and politics becomes the ideal backdrop for the noir drama which is inflected by the colors and gyrations of the orient. The eccentric foul-mouthed painter travels with the strokes of her brush to Mooristan from Bombay, and in Rushdie's words, “these were polemical pictures, in a way they were an attempt to create a romantic myth of the plural, hybrid nation” (227).¹

Aurora signifies the voice of a minoritarian, who had celebrated the multi-cultural ethnicity of her family and the mongrel pluralism of Bombay, the city she chose to live in, thus legitimizing the secularism of the nation, as it claimed its origin to be not from a singular essence. Her deceitful murder by Raman Fielding's majoritarian fundamentalist thugs points to the abortion and subversion of the minoritarian aspirations and dreams. Immediately thereafter the mosque at Ayodhya is destroyed:

Alphabet-soupists, “fanatics” . . . swarmed over the seventeenth century Babri Masjid and tore it apart with their bare hands, with their teeth, with the elemental power of what Sir V. Naipaul has approvingly called their “awakening to history” . . . Saffron flags were raised. There was much chanting of dhuns: “Raghupati Raghava Raja Ram” &c . . . It was what Camoens da Gama had prophesied long ago: the coming of the Battering Ram. (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 363)

Rushdie points to the complexity and ambiguity of Gandhi behind the veneer of simplicity:

These days, few people pause to consider the complex character of Gandhi's personality, the ambiguous nature of his achievement and legacy, or even the real causes of Indian Independence. These are hurried, sloganizing times, and we don't have the time or, worse, the inclination to assimilate many-sided truths . . . As the analyst Sunil Khilnani has pointed out...He [Gandhi] turned to legends and stories from India's popular religious traditions, preferring their lessons to the supposed ones of history (Rushdie, *Step Across* 139).

If recuperating an accommodative Indian secularism from the religious past is ruled out and since the present European model, which Rushdie himself mourns, is failing miserably, could any alternative model be created within the framework of secularism? Here it is worth noting Akeel Bilgrami's argument that the “Archimedean secularism of Nehru,” which is authoritarian and imposing in nature, should be replaced by creating a space for negotiation between the substantive commitments of particular religious communities. Such a “negotiated secularism” may be an ideal alternative (454-86). But in Rushdie's world the corruption and erosion of purity is pervasive. It does not leave particular religious communities or minorities out of its gambit. They suffer peculiarly from a total loss of faith or are engulfed by regional fanaticism which

¹ Since Rushdie is fictionalizing history, as exemplified by his meditations on Gandhi and his inextricable links to Hindu religion and the appropriation of the *Ganesh Chaturthi* festivities by the Hindu Right, the author's subjectivity merges with that of his character(s), as I have underscored, during many significant moments in *The Moor's Last Sigh*.

obscures their religious commonality: "Hazare was a Christian Maharashtrian and had joined up with Fielding's crew for regionalist, rather than religious reasons. O, we all had reasons, personal or ideological" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 312).

Rushdie reviles at the harsher realities of majoritarian extremism and the vulnerabilities of the minorities: "Once, in a family quarrel, I reminded her (Aurora) angrily of the many newspaper reports of her assimilation by the festival" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 124). As Raman Fielding's "Mumbai Axis" communalists and other "alphabet-soupists" go around "joking at their diner-parties about 'teaching minority groups a lesson' and 'putting people in their place'" (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 338), religious perversity, which is the contemporary national reality, is foregrounded. Pervasive nihilism forebodes the future as fundamentalism has come to stay. Finally after murdering a virulent fanatic (Raman Fielding), Moor wonders whether he has become a murdering fanatic too:

Violence was violence, murder was murder, two wrongs did not make a right: these are truths of which I was fully cognizant . . . [The violent extremists] surge among us, left and right, Hindu and Muslim, knife and pistol, killing, burning, looting, and raising into the smoky air their clenched and bloody fists. Both their houses are damned by their deeds; and both sides sacrifice the right to any shred of virtue; they are each other's plagues (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 365).

Rushdie's closed door approach to religion and voicing for the total bifurcation of politics from religion does not allow space to interrogate the recent debates on secularism vis-à-vis his novel. By adopting an analytical stand and reading the changes it warrants that holding on to secularism is the best possible way to counter fundamentalism and majoritarianism in a democracy, rather than adopting a very rigid, pessimistic and nihilistic stand. Rushdie does seem to be alienated from the reality of our times. Akheel Bilgrami's concern for the rights of particular minority communities, or Partha Chatterjee's concern for group and minority religious rights, elude discussion with respect to *The Moor's Last Sigh*, as the main characters are "hybridized" and do not exhibit the normal traits of the minority community, living and operating together as a group (Cossman and Kapur 93). They are too individualistic and eccentric, moulded to travel with Rushdie, as he wavers from realism to surrealism, from pre-colonial Cochin to Bombay, and from Bombay to Moorish Spain. Their hybrid mongrel background also enables the author to blur their allegiance to any one faith or collective loyalty to a larger community, which otherwise might be difficult to elide in the conservative religion dominated backdrop where the narrative is set, particularly in Cochin where the novel begins.

Majoritarian community characters who are amidst the religious frenzy like Raman fielding/ Bal Thakeray or Uma/ Uma Bharathi are satirically caricatured or made unpredictable and impulsive, and are too removed from normalcy. Their characterization therefore does not help us to study the nuances in grey scales between the black and white of majoritarian-minoritarian relationships.

Cosmopolitan Secularism and *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Moors' mongrel hybrid background, pre-modern and pre-colonial trading in spices between countries without rigid borders, tolerant multi-religious Moorish Spain, Bombay's multicultural pluralism, Alhambra, whose architecture embodies the merger of the landscape with the seascape, without any distinct line of horizon, serve as true archetypes for Rushdie to renew his call for a borderless world. He revels in the twilight zone of the hybrid Zogoiby family, as he

traces the vagaries of their fortune through his infinitely appropriated vocabulary, and with his trenchant satire describes the corruption of Moor living in the communally inflamed times, lamenting in the end the destruction of his beloved Bombay, which he till then thought would only be “slightly” affected – “Bombay was not inoculated and what happened elsewhere, the language business for example, also spread into its streets. But on the way to Bombay the rivers of blood were usually diluted, other rivers poured into them, so that by the time they reached the city’s streets the disfigurements were relatively slight” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 350).

Rushdie’s unconditional and perennial love for Bombay gets aggrandized by his having not visited it for eight years (due to exile), and vivid nostalgia grips him, as he intervenes fairly strongly: “Am I sentimentalizing? . . . O Beautifiers of the city, did you not see that what was beautiful in Bombay was that it belonged to nobody, and to all?” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 350). As he values the human community above collective identification, Bombay becomes a city without boundaries, at once belonging to nobody and to everyone. His cherished hybridity is not merely something romantic, to him it means a serious sense of responsibility as a citizen of the world. He acknowledges his complicity in the evil, “We were both the bombers and the bombs. The explosions were our own evil – no need to look for foreign explanations, though there was and is evil beyond our frontiers as well as within” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 372). As he wants to transcend all boundaries, and not be bound by any affiliation except to the world citizenry and international cosmopolitanism, Rushdie collapses the notions of Indian and American-Indian, as he celebrates the porous multiplicity of his cosmopolitan world:

In a way I had been in Indian country all my life, learning to read its signs, to follow its trails, rejoicing in its immensity, in its inexhaustible beauty, struggling for territory, sending up smoke-signals, beating its drums, pushing out its frontiers, making my way through its dangers, hoping to find friends, fearing its cruelty, longing for its love . . . In Indian country there was no room for a man who didn’t want to belong to a tribe, who dreamed of moving beyond; of peeling off his skin and revealing his secret identity—the secret, that is, of the identity of all men—of standing before the war-painted braves to unveil the flayed and naked unity of the flesh. (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 414)

Finally, he laments the lost possibilities of pluralism but remains fervent in his plea for removing the boundaries of the self: “The Alhambra, . . . that monument to a lost possibility that nevertheless has gone on standing, long after its conquerors have fallen; like a testament to lost but sweetest love, . . . to the defeated love that is greater than what defeats it, to that most profound of our needs, to our need for flowing together, for putting an end to frontiers, for the dropping of the boundaries of the self” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 433).

Shashi Tharoor’s *Riot* and Religion

Lakshman reveals to Priscilla the role of religion in the everyday life of an average Indian Hindu like him: “Yes, I pray to Hindu gods. It’s not that I believe that there is, somewhere in heaven, a god that looks like a Bombay calendar artist’s image of him. It’s simple that prayer is a way of acknowledging a divinity beyond human experience” (Tharoor 142). At the same time, in his interview with Randy Diggs, Professor Mohammed Sarwar points to the role of Azad, in being a Muslim and an Indian and elaborates about himself: “The fact that I bow my head towards the Kaaba five times a day . . . does not mean I am turning away from my [Indian] roots. I can eat masala dosa at the Coffee House, chew a paan afterwards and listen to Ravi Shanker playing raag durbari, and I celebrate the Indian-ness in myself with each note” (Tharoor 112-13).

Ram Charan Gupta, who is the strident voice of Hindu Right, obtrusively tells Randy Diggs – “India is asserting itself, Mr. Diggs, and your readers are told nothing of the resurgent pride of Indians in their own land, their own culture, their own history. Instead all you can see is the threat to ‘secularism,’ as if that were some precious Indian heritage?” (Tharoor 230-31). When enquired by Lakshman as to whether she is on “some sort of missionary vocation,” Priscilla replies: “Don’t be silly. I mean, I am a believing Methodist, but my church didn’t send me here. I’m here as a student anyway” (Tharoor 23). Tharoor’s characters are moulded in a realistic way which enables us to understand how important faith is in general and why religion plays such a vital role in the lives of ordinary people, and particularly in the Indian sub-continent.

Secularism in *Riot* as Compared with *The Moor's Last Sigh*

Even as he endorses religious tolerance within his secular world, Tharoor is cautious about the majoritarian ambitions and religious fundamentalism. Secularism is easily appropriated and given a convenient meaning by the Hindu Right: “Where else do you have our mixture of ethnicities and castes, our profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, our varieties of geography and climate, our diversity of religions and cultural practices, our clamour of political parties, our ranges of economic development?” (Tharoor 231). But this Hindu Right Rhetoric does not deter Lakshman from practicing his faith: “I don’t have anything in common with these so-called Hindu fundamentalists. Actually, it’s a bit odd to speak of ‘Hindu fundamentalism,’ because Hinduism is a religion without fundamentals: no organized church, no compulsory beliefs or rites of worship, no single sacred book. The name itself denotes something less, and more, than a set of theological beliefs” (Tharoor 143).

Lakshman, far from downing the shutters on fundamentalists, appropriates their territory to subvert and challenge them with his religious ideas:

To be Indian is to be part of an elusive dream we all share, a dream that fills our minds with sounds, words, flavors from many sources that we cannot easily identify. Muslim invaders may indeed have destroyed Hindu temples, putting mosques in their place, but this did not – could not – destroy the Indian dream. Nor did Hinduism suffer a fatal blow. Large, eclectic, agglomerative, the Hinduism that I know understands that faith is a matter of hearts and minds, not of bricks and stone. “Build Ram in your heart,” the Hindu is enjoined; and if Ram is in your heart, it will matter little where else he is, or is not. (Tharoor 145)

As he celebrates the eclecticism of his non doctrinal religion he is cautious about its collectivization: “‘Say with pride that we are Hindus.’ Gupta and Sharma never fail to spit that slogan at me. And I am proud of my Hinduism, But in what precisely am I, as a Hindu, to take pride? Hinduism is no monolith; its strength is found within each Hindu, not in the collectivity” (Tharoor 146). Maulana Azad is celebrated by Tharoor because of a similar line of thinking. Sarwar quotes from Maulana’s speech:

I am Musulman and proud of the fact . . . I am proud of being an Indian. I am part of that indivisible unity that is Indian nationality . . . I am indispensable to this noble edifice. Without me this splendid structure of India is incomplete . . . It was India’s historic destiny that many human races and cultures and religions should flow to her, and that many a caravan should rest here . . . One of the last of these caravans was that of the followers of Islam. They came here and settled for good. We brought our treasures with us, and India too was full of the riches of

her own precious heritage . . . Islam has now as great a claim on the soil of India as Hinduism.
(Tharoor 108)²

To Sarwar, Azad is the true representative of Indian Islam rather than Jinnah, who is castigated for accepting Pakistan as the homeland of Indian Muslims: “Jinnah and his followers have given the Hindu bigots their best excuse [w]hen they acted, in the name of all Indian Muslims, to surrender a portion of our entitlement by saying that the homeland of an Indian Muslim is really a foreign country called Pakistan” (Tharoor 110).

Azad, with his commitment to nationalism and faith, is more acceptable to Tharoor than Zinnah, who, being a non-believer, pork-eater and a husband of a Parsee woman, would have been more acceptable to Rushdie in his rejection of religion as a secularist. Tharoor’s secularism differs from that of Rushdie, as it is accommodative of faith and religious tolerance, even if both of them celebrate the multi-religious, multicultural pluralism of the Indian past. Tharoor wants to draw a fine line between individual faith and fundamentalism. He abhors extremism but gives faith a central place. Lakshman, when commenting on the attempts to construct a temple in the place of the desecrated mosque, tells Priscilla:

I am not amongst the Indian secularists who oppose agitation because they reject the historic basis of the claim that the mosque stood on the site of Ram’s birth. They may be right, they may be wrong, but to me what matters is what most people believe, for their beliefs offer a sounder basis for public policy than the historians’ footnotes . . . let us assume for a moment that there was a Ram Janmabhoomi temple here that was destroyed to make room for this mosque four hundred and sixty years ago, does that mean that we should behave in that way today? If the Muslims of the 1520s acted out of ignorance and fanaticism, should Hindus act the same ways in the 1980s? By doing what you propose to do, you will hurt the feelings of the Muslims of today, who did not perpetrate the injustices of the past and who are in no position to inflict injustice upon you today; you will provoke violence and rage against your own kind; you will tarnish the name of the Hindu people across the world; and you will irreparably damage your own cause. Is this worth it? (Tharoor 145-46).

Lakshman is concerned about not hurting the feelings of the Muslims of today and the irreparable damage this act of destruction would cause to the Hindu people across the world. Tharoor assumes that the believers share a sense of responsibility which might create a space where a dialogue can take place to negotiate the communal difference and intolerance. To that extent Tharoor’s tolerant religiosity is visceral, dynamic, and hopeful of combating the widely spread tentacles of the Hindu Right and fundamentalists. In the case of Rushdie when the Mosque at Ayodhya is destroyed, he looks at it more intellectually: “Alphabet-Soupists brought the Masjid down with the elemental power of what Sir V. Naipaul has approvingly called their ‘awakening to history’” (*Moor’s Last Sigh* 363). He is introspective in his lamentation: “It was an end and a beginning” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 363). Zeenat Vakil expresses her contempt on Ram-Rajya rhetoric: “What bunkum, I swear . . . Point one: in a religion with a thousand and one gods they suddenly decided only one chap matters . . . So suddenly there is this invention of mass puja, and that is declared the only way to show true, class-A devotion. A single, martial deity, a single book, and a mob rule: that is what they have made of Hindu culture, its many-headed beauty, its peace” (Rushdie, *Moor’s Last Sigh* 338). As Zeenat Vakil is slightly nostalgic in accommodating the many-headed beauty of Hindu religion and its multicultural peace, Moor retorts sharply:

² Like Tharoor, I have quoted Azad at length here, as his voice exemplifies the sentiments of many Indian Muslims that is disavowed by the Hindu Right.

“You think Hindus Sikhs and Muslims never killed each other before?” (Rushdie, *Moor's Last Sigh* 338). Rushdie's stand on religion and allegiance to it is uncompromising.

Perhaps Rushdie, being a minoritarian and writing from the perspective of the minoritarian Moor Zogoiby, gives rise to his apprehension against majoritarianism and makes him impervious to any negotiation concerning the place of religion in contemporary Indian secularism, whereas Tharoor's advocacy for tolerant religiosity within secularism is enabled by his being a member of a majoritarian community, as suggested by his name, and writing from the perspective of his protagonist Lakshman who belongs to a majoritarian/Hindu community.

Critics of Secularism and *Riot*

While rejecting the European model, Ashish Nandy accepts the Indian meaning of secularism as having equal respect for all religions. Nandy calls for exploring “the theology of tolerance in the faiths of the [Indian] citizens” (338), and notes that South Asian nations “may learn something about religious tolerance from everyday Hinduism, Islam, Buddhism, or Sikhism” (338). Going back to the religious past of India and recuperating the Gandhian values of tolerance and respect for all religions and rejecting modernity is his answer to the problematics of Indian secularism. The tolerance of religion he advocates is also a “tolerance that is religious” (Nandy 321-45). For T.N. Madan, secularism has facilitated the rise of Hindu nationalism and religious fundamentalism by denying the rightful place of religion in human life and society, and he advocates:

A decentralized polity, a positive attitude towards cultural pluralism, and a genuine concern and respect for human rights would be, perhaps the best guarantors of Indian secularism, understood as inter-religious understanding in a society on the state policy of non-discrimination and of equal distance (not equal proximity) from the religious concerns of the people. (297-321)

Madan does not reject secularism completely like Nandy but, like him, looks for the Gandhian ideal of inter-religious understanding developed in the tolerant past. Tharoor, like Madan, does not reject secularism, and adopts the stand of tolerance and equal respect for religions, as espoused by Nandy. Lakshman recuperates Gandhian values from the past: “Mahatma Gandhi was as devout a Ram bhakt as you can get – he died from a Hindu assassin's bullet with the words ‘He[y] Ram’ on his lips-but he always said that for him, Ram and Rahim were the same deity, and that if Hinduism ever taught hatred of Islam or of non-Hindus, ‘it is doomed to destruction’” (Tharoor, *Riot* 147).

Mohammed Sarwar tells Lakshman:

What explains these contradictory legends of the martyred jihadi revered by Muslim fundamentalists and the noble cow-protector worshipped by ordinary Hindus? Extremists of both stripes have sought to discredit the secular appeal of Ghazi Miyan . . . The Hindutva types lament that the offerings made by Hindus at the Ghazi's tomb go to support Islamic schools, hospitals, and mosques – the very fact that the secularists hail as evidence of composite religiosity. (Tharoor, *Riot* 66)

Thus as Lakshman is looking to the past for reinventing the values of inter-religious tolerance and pluralism, Sarwar looks back to the past to study its appropriation by the Hindu right to create communal strife. In his interview with Randy Diggs, Lakshman expresses his anguish at the Ram Sila Pujan programme:

I saw what was happening as nothing less than an assault on political values of secular India. I asked permission to ban the processions in my district. It was denied . . . So the government's inaction in the face of all this provocation profoundly alienated the Muslims. For many of them their faith and hope in Indian secularism, built over four decades of dogged efforts by successive administrations soured. (Tharoor, *Riot* 72)

He feels helpless as the faith of Muslims in secularism is being eroded due to connivance of the administration with religious extremism.

Is it possible to legitimize religion in politics and yet be secular? Are religions not intrinsically intolerant? Are they not homogenizing in their sweep? How is secularism understood in India? T.N. Madan says: "We do not, of course, have a wall of separation in India, for there is no Church to wall off, but only the notion of neutrality or equidistance between the state and the religious identity of the people. What makes this idea important is that not only Nehru but all Indians who consider themselves patriotic and modern, nationalist and rationalist, subscribe to it" (310). As Brenda Cossman and Ratna Kapur elaborate, Gandhi's ideal, in contrast to Nehru's vision, was *Sarva Dharma Samabhava*/the acceptance/equality of all religions – which is based on the principle of equal respect for all religions and which rejected the idea of the separation of religion and politics (57). The parties of the Hindu Right have appropriated this idea and come out with their own ingenious definition of secularism through their (majoritarian) discursive moves, albeit indirectly, as noted by Prakash Chandra Upadhyaya: "Beneath the surface, however, this discourse of secularism and equality is an unapologetic appeal to brute majoritarianism and an assault on the very legitimacy of minority rights" (Upadhyaya qtd. in Cossman and Kapur 67).

Upadhyaya, arguing for the Nehruvian model asserts that "the concept of *Sarva Dharma Samabhava* has failed" and led to "the communalization of Indian politics," and "[i]n his view, this understanding of secularism which envisions the state as 'the representative body of all religious communities' becomes a majoritarian secularism" (qtd. as in Cossman and Kapur 88). He argues that if, upon adopting this approach to secularism, all communities were to be equal, "One would be more equal than others – namely, the majority 'Hindu community'" (89). As we see from the discussion of the contemporary realities in India, Upadhyaya's concern seems legitimate as the tenuous "tolerant religiosity" is open for easy manipulation and appropriation by the Hindu Right.

Conclusion

Rushdie's endorsement of separation between religion and politics epitomized by secularism, has exhausted its possibilities in his own depiction of Bombay's destruction and the fall of Moorish Spain. Such possibilities of secularism and peaceful coexistence seem irredeemable mainly because of the Hindu right and its insidious attacks through its various outfits like its student wing – ABVP Akhil Bharatiya Vidyarthi Parishad/All Indian Student Council. Whereas Tharoor's take on secularism, in his acceptance of the challenge posed by the Hindu Right, gives us hope and creates new possibilities for further negotiations between communities. To counter the problems posed by a fundamentalist government within the framework of secularism, Partha Chatterjee, using Foucauldian notion of "anti-governmentality," advocates the need "to resist state's totalizing sovereign power" (Sunder Rajan 84). Besides, a rethinking of the principle of toleration may help us redefine secularism for contemporary times and interrogate the understanding of secularism as acceptance of all faiths since "there [can be]

no return to a space of pure Indian culture, uncontaminated by the colonial and postcolonial encounter” (Cossman and Kapur 93).

By reconfiguring toleration, group rights and minority religious rights can be accommodated within secularism. Chatterjee draws attention to the Shiromani Gurudwara Prahadak Committee as the first public body to have universal suffrage, and acknowledges the later misuse of the SGPC to legitimize Sikh separatism, but asserts that an intervention of juridical sovereignty can contract this (235). Akeel Bilgrami, countering Chatterjee’s despair at the state’s failure, and arguing against a philosophical doctrine which is pessimistic about the State, asks: “why can’t we struggle to improve the State?” (417). But Chatterjee is more concerned with resistance: “It is naïve to think of secularization as simply the onward march of rationality, devoid of coercion and power struggles” (227). Lakshman tells Randy Diggs about Peace committees in *Riot*: “It’s something we set up pretty much everywhere we have a history of communal trouble. Committees bringing together leaders of both communities to work together, sort out their problems” (76). These committees appear as formal gatherings during a carnage and then disappear. As Chatterjee advocates, they have to be legitimized and the group rights and minority religious/cultural rights should be addressed by rearticulating tolerance (229-35). But any inclusion of communitarian rights within secularism, as Chatterjee points out rely on the judiciary (234-35).

As Cossman and Kapur point out “the Supreme Court [has] erred in concluding that Hindutwa constitutes ‘a way of life’ of the people of the subcontinent” (3), and except for its judgment in the historic *S.R. Bommai v. Union of India*, when it upheld the presidential rule in the various northern states immediately after the Babri Masjid destruction, all other decisions till date has been dangerously favoring the Hindu right (53-141). In such conditions the very concept of secularism is at stake. Communitarian rights and religious understanding does appeal as an intellectual debate on secularism but the reality of the situation underscores the underlying danger in these exercises, as when the line between religion and politics is blurred, the excesses of extremism cannot be addressed easily even in the highest court. It is not an easy task to rescue secularism from the prevailing semantic conflation, once any dilution in its original Nehruvian meaning is accepted.

Moreover, these scholarly debates on secularism do not address women who bear the brunt of communal violence and breach of secular values. As experience has shown, granting legal rights to SGPC or Wakf Board has also worked on patriarchal lines and has kept women as neglected minorities and their civil rights never addressed. As Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan notes, “the question of gender is nowhere directly addressed [in the secularism debates], though the conflict that is noted between the constitution’s equality provisions (Articles 14 and 15) and the freedom of religion and rights of minorities provisions (Articles 25-30) marks the space of such an address” (Sunder Rajan, “Women between Community and State” 156). Therefore if women, minority, and group rights have to be addressed, it has to be done within secularism, by enforcing the bifurcation of religion and politics more forcefully through constitutional and legal means, thereby ensuring the constitutional guarantee of equality to all citizens and neutrality of the state in religious affairs, rather than by giving in to majoritarian ambitions through any kind of compromise and finally forsaking secularism itself.

(I profoundly thank Prof. Priya Kumar for her advice on this essay.)

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