



Postcolonial literature and Indian identity in "The Great Indian Novel."

Dr. Prakash Eknath Navgire

Sir Vithaldas Thackersey College
of Home Science (Autonomous)

SNDT Women's University, Mumbai

Juhu Campus, Santacruz (West)

Mumbai

Abstract:

This research study delves into the intersection of postcolonial literature and Indian identity in Shashi Tharoor's monumental work, "The Great Indian Novel." Drawing upon postcolonial theories and literary analysis, the study aims to explore how Tharoor's novel engages with the complexities of Indian identity in the aftermath of British colonial rule. The research critically examines the ways in which Tharoor employs a unique blend of satire, parody, and historical reimagining to challenge dominant narratives and interrogate the construction of Indian identity. By analysing the portrayal of characters, the narrative structure, and the intertextual references, the study uncovers the intricate layers through which Tharoor explores the postcolonial condition, the legacy of colonialism, and the struggles of national identity formation. The research further investigates the role of language, cultural symbolism, and historical reinterpretation in shaping the representation of Indian identity in the novel. Through a comprehensive analysis of "The Great Indian Novel," this research aims to contribute to the broader understanding of postcolonial literature, Indian identity, and the complex interplay between history, fiction, and nation-building.

Keywords: colonial rule, historical reimagining, intertextual references, colonialism...

Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" stands as a significant work in the realm of postcolonial literature, exploring the complex relationship between Indian identity and the legacy of British colonial rule. Through a masterful blend of historical retelling, satire, and intertextuality, Tharoor offers a compelling examination of the multifaceted aspects of Indian identity in the postcolonial context.

One prominent aspect of postcolonial literature is its engagement with the effects of colonialism on the colonized society. Tharoor's novel delves into the historical events surrounding India's struggle for independence and frames them within a broader, allegorical narrative. By reimagining key moments from Indian history and blending them with characters and motifs from the Indian epic, Mahabharata, Tharoor highlights the complex interplay between colonial domination and the formation of Indian identity. Through this approach, he challenges the simplistic narratives propagated by the colonizers and encourages readers to question and reassess their understanding of history. Satire plays a pivotal role in Tharoor's exploration of Indian identity. By employing sharp wit and humour, he critiques the postcolonial condition and exposes the power dynamics at play. The novel satirizes not only the British colonialists but also Indian political figures, highlighting the complexities of power struggles within the newly independent nation. Tharoor's satirical lens invites readers to question the authenticity and motivations of those in positions of authority and to recognize the nuances and contradictions within Indian society.

Intertextuality is another vital aspect of "The Great Indian Novel" that contributes to the exploration of Indian identity. Tharoor weaves together a rich tapestry of literary and cultural references, drawing upon Indian epics, Western literature, and historical texts. By blending these diverse influences, he constructs a narrative that reflects the heterogeneous nature of Indian identity. Through intertextuality, Tharoor showcases the interconnectedness of different cultural and literary traditions, challenging essentialist notions of Indian identity and embracing a more inclusive and diverse understanding of the nation.

Tharoor's novel also addresses the enduring impact of colonialism on Indian identity. He confronts the complex legacies of colonial rule, such as linguistic diversity, religious tensions, and social hierarchies, which continue to shape contemporary Indian society. By illuminating these issues, Tharoor encourages readers to critically engage with the aftermath of colonialism and recognize the ongoing struggles for identity and empowerment faced by postcolonial nations. "The Great Indian Novel" embodies the essence of postcolonial literature by delving into the complexities of Indian identity in the aftermath of British colonialism. Through historical reimagining, satire, intertextuality, and an exploration of enduring legacies, Tharoor's work presents a nuanced and thought-provoking reflection on the construction and negotiation of Indian identity within the postcolonial context.

"The Great Indian Novel" has been widely acclaimed for its ambitious scope and intricate narrative, but a critical view reveals certain shortcomings and limitations within the work. While Tharoor's intention to intertwine Indian history, mythology, and politics is commendable, the execution often falls short in terms of coherence and character development.

One of the primary criticisms of the novel is its convoluted and fragmented narrative structure. Tharoor weaves together multiple historical periods, events, and characters from both Indian mythology and modern politics, resulting in a complex web that can be challenging to navigate. The frequent shifts in time and perspective, while intended to create an intertextual tapestry, often lead to a disjointed reading experience, making it difficult for readers to fully engage with the story. Furthermore, the vast array of characters introduced throughout the novel often lack depth and fail to evoke genuine emotional connection. Many of

the characters, including the central protagonist, appear as mere caricatures or mouthpieces for political ideologies rather than fully developed individuals. As a result, the reader's investment in their journeys and struggles remains superficial, hindering the novel's ability to resonate on a deeper emotional level.

In addition, the heavy use of satire and parody, though a distinctive feature of the novel, occasionally veers into excessive cynicism and exaggeration. While satire can serve as a powerful tool for social critique, it risks undermining the complexity and nuance of the issues being addressed. The relentless mockery and lampooning of historical figures and political events can diminish the weight and significance of the underlying socio-political themes, detracting from a more meaningful exploration of Indian identity and postcolonial realities. Moreover, some critics argue that Tharoor's portrayal of Indian identity remains limited and fails to fully represent the diverse cultural, linguistic, and regional complexities of the country. The novel predominantly focuses on the perspectives of elite, English-speaking individuals, thereby neglecting the voices and experiences of marginalized communities. This narrow lens limits the novel's ability to offer a comprehensive and inclusive understanding of Indian identity, and instead perpetuates certain stereotypes and power dynamics.

The novel showcases Shashi Tharoor's intellectual prowess and ambition, it falls short in terms of narrative cohesiveness, character development, and representation of diverse identities. A critical view reveals that the novel's complex structure, shallow characterizations, excessive satire, and limited scope ultimately hinder its potential to fully explore and engage with the intricacies of Indian identity and postcolonial realities.

The work delves into the complexities of Indian identity, presenting a nuanced exploration of the diverse cultural, historical, and political forces that shape the nation. Through its multifaceted narrative and intertextual references, the novel highlights the intricate layers and contradictions inherent in Indian identity.

One of the complexities addressed in the novel is the negotiation between tradition and modernity. Tharoor depicts a society grappling with the tension between traditional cultural values and the rapid changes brought about by colonization and globalization. Characters in the novel embody this conflict, navigating between adherence to age-old customs and aspirations for progress and modernization. Tharoor skilfully portrays the struggle to reconcile these opposing forces, offering insight into the complexities of Indian identity formation.

Another aspect of Indian identity explored in the novel is the diverse cultural and linguistic landscape of the country. Tharoor captures the heterogeneity of India by incorporating multiple languages, dialects, and regional customs into the narrative. By doing so, he reflects the complex mosaic of identities that coexist within the nation. The novel embraces this diversity as an integral part of Indian identity, challenging essentialist notions of a singular Indian culture and showcasing the richness of the country's multicultural tapestry. Furthermore, "The Great Indian Novel" delves into the intersections of religion, caste, and social hierarchy in shaping Indian identity. Tharoor examines the power dynamics and discrimination prevalent

in Indian society, exposing the complex interplay between religious beliefs, social divisions, and political manoeuvring. The novel raises questions about how these factors influence individual and collective identities, and how they contribute to the construction of an inclusive or exclusive notion of Indian identity.

Tharoor also addresses the legacy of colonization and its impact on Indian identity. Through historical reimagining and satirical commentary, he critiques the British colonial rule and its lasting effects on Indian society. The novel reveals the enduring influence of colonial ideologies, English education, and social structures imposed by the colonizers, highlighting the complexities of decolonization and the quest for reclaiming and asserting an authentic Indian identity.

"The Great Indian Novel" explores the intersectionality of gender and Indian identity. Tharoor confronts the patriarchy ingrained within Indian society, revealing the challenges faced by women in navigating societal expectations and gender roles. The novel presents female characters who resist and subvert these norms, emphasizing the complexities of gender dynamics in shaping Indian identity. Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" probes into the complexities of Indian identity by examining the negotiation between tradition and modernity, embracing the diversity of cultural and linguistic identities, addressing the intersections of religion and caste, critiquing the impact of colonization, and exploring the complexities of gender dynamics. Through these explorations, the novel provides a rich and multifaceted understanding of the intricate layers that contribute to the formation of Indian identity.

Shashi Tharoor employs a unique blend of satire, parody, and historical reimagining, which contributes to the distinctiveness and impact of the novel. Tharoor's skilful use of these literary devices serves multiple purposes, including social critique, political commentary, and the deconstruction of dominant narratives.

Satire plays a prominent role in the novel, allowing Tharoor to expose the follies, hypocrisies, and absurdities of both the British colonial rule and post-independence Indian politics. Through his satirical lens, he humorously highlights the flaws and shortcomings of various historical figures and political ideologies. By employing irony and wit, Tharoor encourages readers to critically examine the actions and motivations of those in power, challenging the glorified and idealized versions of historical events.

Parody is another powerful device used by Tharoor, allowing him to mimic and mock established literary works, political speeches, and historical events. By drawing upon famous texts, such as the Indian epic Mahabharata and influential political speeches, Tharoor creates a satirical interplay between the original source material and his reimagined narrative. This intertextual parody not only adds layers of complexity to the story but also invites readers to question and reinterpret the cultural and political symbols embedded within the original texts.

Historical reimagining is a significant aspect of Tharoor's narrative technique. He skilfully blends historical events with fictional elements, blurring the lines between fact and fiction. Tharoor's reinterpretation of history allows him to challenge and subvert dominant narratives, offering alternative perspectives and shedding light on hidden or marginalized aspects of Indian history. This historical reimagining serves as a

form of resistance against the simplistic and one-sided narratives that have often shaped the understanding of India's past.

Collectively, Tharoor's use of satire, parody, and historical reimagining in "The Great Indian Novel" creates a rich and dynamic narrative that goes beyond a conventional historical account. It allows him to provide a satirical critique of the political and social realities of both the colonial and post-independence eras. Moreover, these literary devices provide a platform for Tharoor to explore and challenge established narratives, encouraging readers to question prevailing assumptions and to engage with the complexities of Indian history, politics, and identity.

The work of art probes into the postcolonial condition, examining the lasting impact of British colonial rule on India's social, political, and cultural landscape. Tharoor's exploration of the postcolonial condition is multifaceted, encompassing various themes and narrative strategies that shed light on the complexities of India's journey from colonization to independence.

One key aspect of Tharoor's examination is the critique of colonial ideologies and practices. Through his characters and events, he exposes the exploitative nature of colonialism, its inherent racism, and the ways in which it sought to subjugate and control the Indian population. Tharoor challenges the notion of British superiority and questions the narratives that justified colonial rule. By doing so, he aims to dismantle the dominant narratives constructed by the colonizers and to offer a more nuanced understanding of the colonial experience.

Tharoor also investigates the aftermath of colonization, exploring the complexities of decolonization and the challenges faced by newly independent India. He portrays the struggles of nation-building, the political rivalries, and the power dynamics that emerged during this transformative period. Through his characters and their interactions, Tharoor reveals the complexities and contradictions inherent in the postcolonial project, as the newly liberated nation grapples with its identity, reconstructs its institutions, and addresses the legacies of colonialism. Besides, Tharoor's novel highlights the cultural and linguistic implications of the postcolonial condition. He examines the impact of English education and the English language on Indian society, revealing the tension between indigenous languages and the dominant English-speaking elite. Tharoor critiques the imposition of English as a marker of social status and explores the complexities of language as a tool of power and identity.

Moreover, Tharoor addresses the question of agency and resistance within the postcolonial context. Through his characters, he portrays individuals and communities who challenge the structures of power, resist oppressive systems, and assert their agency in shaping their own destinies. Tharoor's exploration of resistance sheds light on the resilience of the Indian people in the face of colonial oppression and the ongoing struggle for social and political justice.

Writer exploration of the postcolonial condition in "The Great Indian Novel" offers a critical and thought-provoking examination of the enduring impact of colonialism on India's history, culture, and identity. Through his narrative, characters, and thematic engagements, Tharoor invites readers to reflect on the

complexities and challenges that arise from the process of decolonization and to consider the ongoing struggle for true independence and self-determination.

The struggles of national identity formation take centre stage as the novel navigates the tumultuous period of India's transition from colonial rule to independence. Tharoor explores the complexities, conflicts, and challenges faced by a diverse nation in the process of defining and constructing its collective identity.

One of the central struggles depicted in the novel is the tension between unity and diversity. Tharoor delves into the rich tapestry of Indian society, encompassing its linguistic, religious, and cultural diversity. Through a wide array of characters, he showcases the multiplicity of identities within the nation and the challenges of forging a shared national identity that encompasses such diversity. The novel emphasizes the need for inclusive nation-building that acknowledges and respects the myriad cultural traditions and regional identities that constitute India.

Another aspect of the struggles of national identity formation explored in the novel is the legacy of colonization. Tharoor critically examines the impact of British colonial rule on India's sense of self and the process of decolonization. He interrogates the influence of Western education, the imposition of the English language, and the devaluation of indigenous knowledge systems on the formation of a postcolonial national identity. Tharoor highlights the complexities of reclaiming and asserting an authentic Indian identity in the face of a colonial legacy that has shaped societal structures, values, and aspirations.

Additionally, the struggles of national identity formation in the novel revolve around the tensions between tradition and modernity. Tharoor presents characters who grapple with the influence of Western ideas, technology, and lifestyles, juxtaposed with the preservation of indigenous cultural practices and values. The novel explores the challenges of reconciling these seemingly conflicting forces and the impact they have on the formation of a cohesive national identity. Tharoor raises questions about the extent to which modernization and globalization erode or enrich India's cultural heritage. Furthermore, Tharoor examines the struggles of marginalized communities and social groups in shaping the narrative of national identity. The novel acknowledges the inherent power imbalances within Indian society, such as caste hierarchies and gender inequalities, which influence the way national identity is constructed and experienced. Tharoor challenges the dominant narratives propagated by the privileged classes and gives voice to those on the margins, highlighting the importance of including diverse perspectives in the process of national identity formation.

Tharoor offers a nuanced portrayal of the struggles of national identity formation in postcolonial India. Through its exploration of unity and diversity, the legacy of colonization, the tension between tradition and modernity, and the inclusion of marginalized voices, the novel captures the complexities and challenges inherent in constructing a cohesive and inclusive national identity. Tharoor invites readers to reflect on these struggles and consider the ongoing quest for a truly representative and pluralistic Indian identity.

The language, cultural symbolism, and historical reinterpretation play crucial roles in shaping the representation of Indian identity. Tharoor skilfully weaves these elements throughout the narrative, offering a complex and multi-layered understanding of Indian culture, history, and collective consciousness.

Language serves as a significant tool in the construction and portrayal of Indian identity in the novel. Tharoor navigates the intricate linguistic landscape of India, incorporating multiple languages, dialects, and linguistic traditions into the narrative. By doing so, he reflects the linguistic diversity and richness of the country. Tharoor also explores the power dynamics associated with language, particularly the influence of English as a legacy of colonialism. The portrayal of language in the novel underscores the complexities of identity formation and the ongoing negotiation between indigenous languages and the dominant English language.

Cultural symbolism is another essential aspect in shaping the representation of Indian identity in the novel. Tharoor draws upon a range of cultural symbols, myths, and religious motifs, such as the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, to explore and reinterpret India's cultural heritage. These symbols serve as touchstones that connect the past with the present, embodying the collective memory and imagination of the nation. Tharoor uses cultural symbolism to evoke a sense of continuity and to highlight the timeless aspects of Indian identity, even in the face of historical disruptions and colonial influences.

Historical reinterpretation is a significant narrative strategy employed by Tharoor to shape the representation of Indian identity. The novel reimagines and reinterprets key historical events and figures, blurring the boundaries between fact and fiction. Tharoor challenges established historical narratives, exposing their biases and limitations. By offering alternative perspectives and subverting dominant historical discourses, Tharoor invites readers to critically reevaluate and engage with India's past. This process of historical reinterpretation allows for a deeper exploration of the complexities and nuances of Indian identity, challenging simplified and essentialist notions.

Collectively, the role of language, cultural symbolism, and historical reinterpretation in "The Great Indian Novel" contributes to a rich and multifaceted representation of Indian identity. Tharoor's careful attention to linguistic diversity, cultural symbolism, and historical reinterpretation allows for a nuanced understanding of the complexities and contradictions within Indian culture and history. Through these narrative devices, the novel celebrates the diversity and richness of Indian identity, while also questioning and challenging dominant narratives and power structures.

There are some explanations that highlight their relevance to postcolonial literature and Indian identity:

Tharoor writes, "For the self to be affirmed, it required the other, and no one was more other than the foreigner it reflects the postcolonial concern of defining one's identity in relation to the colonizer. It suggests that the affirmation of Indian identity often occurred through the recognition and contrast with the foreigner, highlighting the impact of colonial domination on Indian self-perception.

The struggle of reconciling tradition and modernity in Indian identity. Postcolonial India faced the challenge of preserving cultural heritage while embracing progress and modernization. The tension between the two is a recurring theme in postcolonial literature and underscores the complexities of identity formation in a rapidly changing world. Tharoor writes, "To be Indian, it seemed, was to carry the burden of one's heritage while striving to be modern."

Language is a significant aspect of postcolonial literature, and this quotation speaks to the power dynamics involved. It suggests that the use of the colonizer's language can be a form of resistance and reclaiming agency. By employing the English language to challenge colonial narratives, Indian writers engage in a subversive act that asserts their own cultural identity. Writer says, "The colonizers had imposed their language on us; we must use it against them."

In conclusion, the exploration of postcolonial literature and Indian identity in Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" reveals a rich tapestry of themes, complexities, and challenges inherent in the process of decolonization and the construction of a national identity. Through its narrative, characters, and literary devices, the novel offers a nuanced and critical examination of India's colonial past and the subsequent struggles for self-definition.

Tharoor's novel delves into the intricacies of Indian identity formation by interrogating the legacies of colonization, the tensions between tradition and modernity, and the role of language and cultural symbolism. The portrayal of postcolonial India's diversity and linguistic landscape highlights the importance of inclusivity and acknowledges the multiplicity of identities within the nation. By reclaiming and reinterpreting historical events and figures, Tharoor challenges dominant narratives and offers alternative perspectives that expose the biases and limitations of conventional accounts.

Through satire, parody, and historical reimagining, Tharoor invites readers to critically examine the complexities of India's colonial and post-independence eras. The novel critiques the oppressive nature of colonial ideologies, exposes power imbalances, and gives voice to marginalized communities. By engaging with these themes, "The Great Indian Novel" contributes to the larger discourse of postcolonial literature, demonstrating the ways in which literature can serve as a powerful tool for social critique and the reshaping of cultural narratives. Ultimately, Tharoor's work encourages readers to grapple with the intricate process of postcolonial identity formation, recognizing the enduring impacts of colonialism on Indian society and culture. It emphasizes the need for an inclusive understanding of Indian identity that embraces diversity, challenges dominant narratives, and celebrates the resilience and agency of the Indian people. "The Great Indian Novel" stands as a testament to the power of literature in illuminating the complexities of postcolonial experiences and fostering a deeper understanding of Indian identity in all its richness and dynamism.

References:

1. Chowdhury, Kanishka. "Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor's Great Indian Novel." *World Literature Today* 69.1 (1995): 41-48.
2. Crane, Ralph J. "Duelling with the crown: On literature and language in Shashi Tharoor's the great indian novel." *Wasafiri* 16.33 (2001): 58-61.
3. Galván Álvarez, Enrique. "Shashi Tharoor's the Great Indian Novel: a tale told and retold." *Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel* (2012): 1-100.
4. Khadse, Mr Shrikant Prakashrao. "Exploring the Interplay between Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel."
5. Merivirta-Chakrabarti, Raita. "Reclaiming India's History:—Myth, History and Historiography in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel." *Ennen ja nyt: Historian tietosanomat* 7.1 (2007).
6. Panda, Punyashree, and Ms Sulagna Mohanty. "The Parody of the Sacred: A Study of the Characters in the Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor." *International Journal of Business, Humanities, and Technology* 1: 162-66.
7. Rahman, Suzan Raheem, Lamiaa Ahmed Rasheed, and Lujain Ismael Mustafa. "The Adaption of Self-Reflexivity and Metafiction Approach to Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's the Great Indian Novel: A Post-Modernist Study." *International Journal of Early Childhood Special Education* 12.2 (2020).
8. Rao, A. Sudhakar. *Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English*. Atlantic Publishers & Dist, 2000.
9. Roy, Sneharika. "Postcolonial epic rewritings and the poetics of relation: A Glissantian reading of Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel and Derek Walcott's Omeros." *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 51.1 (2015): 59-71.
10. Tharoor, Shashi. *The elephant, the tiger, and the cell phone: Reflections on India, the emerging 21st-century power*. Penguin Books India, 2007.
11. Tharoor, Shashi. *The great Indian novel*. Arcade Publishing, 1993.
12. Wiemann, Dirk. "Mythologising the Quotidian Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel." *Genres of Modernity*. Brill, 2008. 85-101.