

Representing Nation in Literature: Portrayal of Postcolonial India in the Works of Shashi Tharoor

Prabhrati Sen

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Swami Vivekanand Govt. P. G. College, Narsinghpur (M.P)

(Pursuing Ph.D from Barkatullah University, Bhopal)

Abstract

Nationalism has been an important feature of decolonisation struggles in the third world. The concept has also influenced the writing of postcolonial authors. They emphasised the relationship between nationalism and literature. In fact one of the central concerns of postcolonial literature is to observe and reveal the prejudiced and stereotyped representation of a colonised nation by the colonizers in their literary discourse. These representations have a powerful impact on the mind of colonizers as well as colonized even after the decolonization and they are still very much a part of the contemporary world. This paper attempts to seek such a representation of India as a country in the writings of different authors, at the same time it tries to analyse the postcolonial image of India presented in the works of Shashi Tharoor. He tries to clarify the misconceptions about India and break its stereotypical image constructed by the colonial discourse. By doing so how he tries to portray a positive, vibrant and true image of India as a nation in front of world is the main focus of this paper.

Keywords: India, Literature, Nationalism, Postcolonialism, Representation

The concept of Nation is really hard to define as some commentators consider it as an abstract Idea while others perceive it as a geographical unit separated from other nation by a border. This separation many a time was the result of mass destruction and bloody battles. Thus many of the commentators agree to the fact that nations are artificially constructed. "Nations like buildings, are planned by people and built upon particular foundation which also means that, like buildings, they can both rise and fall." (McLeod, 68) Now we can not overlook the prime constituent of a nation that is people belonging to it. The central idea of the nation are notions of collectivity and belonging, a mutual sense of community that a group of individuals imagine it shares, sense of the shared history and common origins of its people. This sense of shared history becomes prominent among the people of a nation that has been once colonized. As during the nationalist movement they were united more by their shared experience of oppression rather by their caste, class or religion.

Postcolonial writings generally try to capture the experiences of the nations that were once colonized. It mainly deals with finding out how these nations have been portrayed in

the writings of colonizers. The major works in this direction are Fanon's *Black Skin, White Mask*, Said's *Orientalism*, Homi K. Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* in which they have explained how a prejudiced, derogative and stereotypical image of the colonized been presented by the colonizers in their writings. Thus it becomes the prime duty of a postcolonial writer to assert the rights of the colonised people to make their own self-definitions, rather than be defined by the colonizers. They offer the means to identify alternative his Tories, cultural traditions and knowledge which conflict with the representations of colonial discourse.

A nationalism grounded in the collective interests of the people must continue to dictate the conduct of nation after it gains the right to self determination, the advocacy of national consciousness creates an important mode of Vigilance *after* independence and is concerned with the possibility of avoiding the pitfalls of *neo-colonialism*. (MacLeod 90-91)

Literature plays an important role in the construction of a national consciousness. It helps a nation to regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of deprecation and self-denigration. Literature of a country and literature about a country play a vital role in presenting the image of that country to the world. As those who have not got the first hand experience of a country, mostly try to decipher the history, culture and people of a country through the books written on that country. Some writers in English literature were influenced by Indian culture and spirituality. Rudyard Kipling and E.M. Foster were leading among those. Rudyard Kipling has spent early years of his life in India which influenced his mind and he has portrayed India in his works. Though India occupies a central position in Kipling's writings and has a special place in his heart, still he couldn't make himself free of the colonizer's prejudices. Kipling's portrayal of Indian people and politics of India are essentially prejudiced. Forster is another such author who has depicted his experience of India. *A Passage to India* represents the relationship between colonizer and colonized. It is depicted through the connection between the Indians and Anglo- Indians who were serving the British government in the colonial India. Several British and European historians have portrayed India as a society that had made no progress for several centuries. This image of India, as an essentially unchanging society, devoid of any technological innovation, having a caste system without any hope for reform, became popular with European scholars and intellectuals of the colonial era. This is the reason that European philosophers such as Hegel justify colonization. And it is this degenerated image of India that most of today's Western writers rely upon for understanding India.

The recent progress made by India has made the West to look upon India with a new interest. The number of books published about India written by Western writers is a clear indicator of this fact. Also there are many documentaries and movies on India made by Westerners. Some of these praise the glorious history and progressive present; and show their honest love for the country. But still there are some who are full of prejudices and look upon India through a colonial mindset. They still perceive the image of India as a poor third world nation haaving poverty, filth, superstition and caste system. As if India has absolutely nothing to be proud about, not even one positive attribute. There are many contemporary western writers who have presented a distorted picture of the country in almost every aspect like author

Katherine Boo attempts to understand India in a slum in Mumbai in her *Behind the Beautiful Forevers*. You will find every cliché about India her book. *India, a Portrait* by Patrick French, which is the output of a travel exercise, is another attempt to ruin the reputation of the country. It is also full of biases about India.

It is not that only the western writers are dwelling in the colonial past, but there are many Indian writers also who still see India through colonial lenses. Arvind Adiga's Man Booker Prize winner novel *The White Tiger* attempts to present a bleak picture of India with all its darkness. The novel revolves around the life of Balram Halwai, the protagonist of the novel. He is a village boy who rises on the social strata by starting his own taxi business in Bangalore. Though he achieves this goal by immoral means - murder of his master and stealing his money. As a small boy Balram earns the title of 'White Tiger' when he impresses a visiting school official with his intelligence. It is a symbol for rare talent. Through the journey of Balram Adiga tries to depict that in India even the rare talents like Balram suffer due to the caste system and corruption prevalent in the country. And in order to be successful they have to tread the same path. Balram himself explains the reasons for his entrepreneurial success in India: "My country is the kind where it pays to play it both ways: the Indian entrepreneur has to be strait and crooked, mocking and believing, sly and sincere, at the same time." (Adiga, 8-9) The novel presents the detailed accounts of the Indian society—rural as well as urban and its various facets. It exposes the problems which are prevalent in our society like poverty, illiteracy, unemployment, caste and culture conflict, superstition, dowry practice, economic divide etc. which are present in the Indian society. Adiga does not talk about the solution to these problems. In its depiction the novel largely forms the Dark image of India. Similarly Adiga's *Last Man in Tower* analyses how globalization as a form of neocolonialism in the postcolonial period affects the social as well as cultural values in India. This novel like *The White Tiger* depicts the problems of corruption, the dearth of standard life, unhygienic conditions of living, slums and the problems of visionless politicians which have been remained unsolved. The novel makes an attempt to reveal the clear divide in India of have and have not's. Thus Adiga is of the view that problems of India are irresolvable.

Salman Rushdie is a prominent post colonial writer and his *Midnight's Children* is considered as a prominent text in postcolonial literature. Rushdie in his novel tries to present a new image of India and Indian citizens in order to provide a realistic image of India. *Midnight's Children* is an important postcolonial text that deals with the problems associated with the Indian postcoloniality like the problem of finding one's personal and national history as well as achieving personal and national authentic identity.

The above discussion clearly mentions that India has always fascinated the writers of English literature. Whether they loved it or hated it, India has been significant in their writings. Some were totally pessimistic about its future while some see a ray of hope: one such writer who is quite optimistic about the future of India and to whom "India matters" a lot is Shashi Tharoor. Now we are going to discuss the image of India presented in Tharoor's works in the next section. Though he has widely travelled the world as an UN official, he could not free himself from the

influence of India. He writes about why India matters to him in a column of *The Hindu* in these words:

I am often asked why, despite my international career, I have set all my books so far in India. The answer is simple. My formative years, from the ages of three to 19, were spent growing up in India. India shaped my mind, anchored my identity, influenced my beliefs, and made me who I am. India matters immensely to me, and in all my writing, I would like to matter to India. (Tharoor)

Like many postcolonial writers of India, Tharoor has also been fascinated by the socio-political conditions of India after independence. He has great faith in the mythical past of India as he believes that we can find solutions of our present day social and political problems in the rich mythological treasure of our country. He is of the view that we can take inspiration from the teachings of ancient epics. He seeks inspiration from the great epic *The Mahabharata* as it has a wonderful commentary on the politics, religion and mythology of India. In his *The Great Indian Novel* he has presented a wonderful blend of history and myth. It addresses the serious socio-political issues that India is facing since independence. The work is a great expression of Tharoor's faith and pride in his culture, his civilization and his nation's history. He mentions the grandeur of India's past through the character of V.V.:

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country.... I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 17)

His next novel *Riot* deals with the problem of communalism, one of the most prominent issues of postcolonial India. Though the problem of communalism in India originated during the British rule yet it has remained unsolved because of the present politicians of postcolonial India. His next novel *Show Business* has got a world-wide acclaim. Tharoor has focused here particularly on the corruption prevalent in the film world. Bollywood which is considered a world of glamour is very hollow from inside. Tharoor has exposed in this novel many myths regarding the film world. The reading of this novel is an eye opening experience for the people who take Bollywood in high esteem as Tharoor has thrown light on the dark side of Bollywood and has shown the real face of the glamorous world.

Tharoor's non-fiction works like his fiction deals with the social, political and historical issues of India. His non-fiction book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond* presents the picture of India's past and future. He has focused on the challenges that India had in past and may have in future. Tharoor is much fascinated by the pluralistic feature of India. There is variety in every aspect of India its culture, regions, religions, languages, climate etc. The greatness of India lies in the fact that it has managed itself with all these varieties and has emerged as one country and one identity known as India. In an interview given to Joanne Myers,

Tharoor has appreciated the role of democracy to bring people of different religions and ethnic groups together and give them their due place in Indian political frame work. He says:

Three years ago after the largest single exercise in democratic franchise anywhere in the world...after that election and the results came out, we had the extraordinary phenomenon of a female political leader who is a Roman Catholic of Italian background, Sonia Gandhi, winning the election and making way for a Sikh, Manmohan Singh, to be sworn as prime minister by a Muslim, President Abdul Kalam, in a country 81 percent Hindu. (Web)

Different chapters of the book present some facts and challenges about India. Though he has presented many of the negative aspects of Indian society, his approach seems to be very positive as he believes that his countrymen would certainly find solutions to the problems which hinder the progress of India.

In his book *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cell Phone: Reflections on India, the Emerging 21st Century Power*, Tharoor has described about the economic revolution and technological advancement of India that has taken place in the last two decades. The metaphor of an elephant has been used to present India a huge and powerful country. The technological progress in India shows how the country is transforming itself from a lazy elephant to an active tiger. Tharoor has described how in a country like India where people had to wait many years to get a telephone connection had a sudden transformation and cell phone became the asset even of the poorer section of the society. There is no doubt in the fact that India has been doing very well in economy and technology for the last few years. India in 21st century is emerging as a supreme power and that attracts the attention of the world. Tharoor has been impressed with the economic development of India and the whole work focuses on the economic, scientific and technical revolution of India.

Tharoor has taken into consideration the contemporary issues as the social, mythical, cultural, historical and political aspects of Indian life. His works also deal particularly with the problems of postcolonial India. In this way Tharoor cannot be separated from other Indian writers in his approach and treatment to the issues of national importance. His ideas about India her plurality, secularism, democracy, socialism and many such diverse issues are dealt with in his works. He has not kept a blind eye towards the ugly picture of the nation. But his main focus has always been to present through his works the transformation of India from a colonized nation to a super power. To show how it has established itself as a brand and why it matters to the today's world. It discusses how far India has come and what it still needs to achieve. Tharoor's works help readers to have a better understanding of today's India.

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