

Revisiting the Past: Contemporary Tradition and Historical Consciousness in the Selected Works of Shashi Tharoor

Satyakeerti Dwivedi

Jiwaji University Gwalior, M.P.

Email: Dwivedisatyakeerti42@gmail.com

Supervisor

Dr. A.S. Kushwah

Professor and Head of the Department

Govt. SLP College Gwalior M. P.

Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's literary and intellectual works insightfully examine India's struggle with its own history and heritage in the postcolonial era. Through both fiction and non-fiction, he reveals how the past continues to shape modern consciousness by reinterpreting the relationship between India's ancient ethos and its contemporary realities. His writings act as cultural dialogues that reclaim and reinterpret the narratives of colonial and postcolonial India, reflecting a constant negotiation between continuity and change, faith and reason, memory and modernity.

In novels like *The Great Indian Novel*, *Show Business*, and *Riot*, Tharoor reconstructs India's historical consciousness through myth, parody, and irony. *The Great Indian Novel* reimagines the Mahabharata to retell the freedom movement, transforming epic archetypes into historical figures and questioning traditional historiography. *Riot* exposes the fragmented moral and cultural landscape of postcolonial India, where religion, memory, and identity continue to influence the national psyche.

His non-fiction works, such as *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* and *Inglorious Empire*, extend these concerns by addressing democracy, secularism, and colonial legacy. Tharoor emphasises the need to reclaim history to guide India's ethical and intellectual growth. Ultimately, his works promote a postcolonial aesthetics of renewal, where tradition becomes a means of self-discovery and history an evolving narrative connecting past and present.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, Tradition and History, Myth and Memory, Indian Consciousness, Colonial Legacy, Cultural Identity, Historiography, Renewal, Modernity and Tradition.

Introduction

One of postcolonial literature's most enduring themes has been the interplay between history, tradition, and modern identity. To define themselves outside of imperial narratives, nations that emerge from the colonial experience must reconstitute their cultural and historical awareness. India offers a particularly rich environment for these literary reimagining because of its extensive colonial past and rich civilizational legacy. Shashi Tharoor is a unique voice among modern Indian writers in English who connects the fields of political philosophy, literature, and history. The idea of India as a heterogeneous civilisation navigating between tradition and modernity, myth and reality, the colonial past and the democratic present is reflected in both his literary and non-fiction writings. The idea that India's story cannot be told from a single historical or cultural perspective is the foundation of Tharoor's intellectual endeavour. The diversity of Indian customs and the flexibility of its historical experience are highlighted in his writings. In a time of ideological division and globalisation, Tharoor goes back to India's past to reinterpret it for modern understanding rather than just rescue it from colonial distortions. His stories show that history is a dynamic discourse influenced by memory, interpretation, and moral imagination rather than a repository of set occurrences. Tharoor reinterprets India's self-perception in the postcolonial world by fusing elements of mythology, history, and political commentary. In his fiction, Tharoor uses creative storytelling techniques to challenge historical accuracy and cultural identity, especially in *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Show Business* (1992), and *Riot* (2001). The Mahabharata is transformed into a contemporary political metaphor of India's post-independence politics and freedom struggle in *The Great Indian Novel*. Tharoor reveals the ethical and ideological problems that underlay both epic and contemporary

history through parody and recontextualization. The book examines the symbolic continuity between historical personalities and mythic archetypes in addition to parodying governmental corruption and power. In a similar vein, *Show Business and Riot* combines media critique, fiction, and historiography to show how narratives—whether historical, political, or cinematic— influence public opinion. Linda Hutcheon’s idea of historiographic metafiction, in which fiction and history combine to explore the nature of representation and truth, is embodied in these works. His literary view of India as a civilisation based on continuity but open to reform and renewal is further supported by Tharoor’s nonfiction works. The 1997 book *India: From Midnight to the Millennium* examines the difficulties facing democracy, secularism, and cultural diversity in India following independence. It traces the moral legacy of the country’s independence movement while providing a fair assessment of its successes and shortcomings. A compelling counter-narrative to imperial historiography, *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India* (2017) reveals the psychological oppression and economic exploitation of colonial rule. In these pieces, Tharoor reclaims India’s agency in world history by fusing rhetorical fluency with historical evidence. His strategy is a form of intellectual decolonisation that reasserts the legitimacy of indigenous viewpoints, or what postcolonial scholar Edward Said refers to as ‘writing back to the empire.’ Tharoor’s ability to combine the literary and the political, the creative and the analytical, is what makes his contribution significant. He employs language as a means of cultural reconstruction in his work as a novelist and public intellectual. His interest in history is always critical and transformative rather than sentimental. Similar to this, Tharoor views tradition as a conversation that takes place across time rather than a static inheritance. According to his works, Indian tradition’s strength is not in its strict preservation but rather in its ability to be reinterpreted and modified. In this way, Tharoor’s viewpoint is

consistent with Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial emphasis on hybridity, which sees cultural identity as a process of negotiation and change rather than a fixed essence.

Tharoor's awareness of the politics of language and storytelling is evident in his narrative style. His understanding of how discourse constructs historical authority is evident in his use of sarcasm, irony, and intertextuality. He undermines prevailing narratives and creates room for alternative voices by revising canonical myths and reinterpreting colonial history. Thus, his articles and fiction help democratise historical learning by highlighting the need for each generation to reinterpret its past in light of current political and moral circumstances. In a larger sense, Tharoor's art represents the spectrum of Indian modernism, which is a modernity that develops with the past rather than separating from it. His portrayal of India veers between admiration for the depth of its civilisation and criticism of its inconsistencies in the present. This conflict reflects India's own battle to strike a balance between nationalism and cosmopolitanism, secularism and spirituality, and development and tradition. As a result, Tharoor's works provide not only literary analysis but also political and philosophical analysis of what it means to be Indian in the twenty-first century.

With an emphasis on how Tharoor's works use literary innovation to recreate India's historical awareness, this research places him within the broader discourse of postcolonial historiography. His critique of colonial and postcolonial politics, his rehabilitation of tradition as a dynamic and inclusive moral framework, and his use of myth as a means of historical storytelling will all be examined in this examination. The study intends to show how Tharoor's relationship with the past helps us grasp the difficulties of the present by looking at both his fiction and non-fiction. In his books, he presents a moral inquiry perspective on history, in which remembering and reimagining are inextricably linked. Shashi Tharoor's ability to turn

literature into a conversation between tradition and change, memory and modernity, is ultimately what makes his contribution to contemporary Indian writing so significant. His writings serve as a reminder to readers that India's cultural power comes from its innovative reconstruction of the past rather than its blind preservation. Tharoor encourages contemporary India to look back on its past as a source of ethical and intellectual renewal rather than as a burden through his distinctive fusion of humour, scholarship, and storytelling.

Shashi Tharoor's creative interpretation of Indian history and tradition via postcolonial sensibilities has garnered a lot of scholarly attention. Critics often point out that Tharoor's stories challenge colonial and nationalist historiography by fusing myth, irony, and political critique. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee, "Tharoor's fiction resists the temptation of simple binaries, instead, it redefines Indianness through the play of cultural multiplicity and political scepticism" (Mukherjee 112). This realisation encapsulates Tharoor's approach to reinterpreting India's past as a continuous conversation between continuity and change rather than as a static legacy. In *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), Tharoor reinterprets the nationalist struggle through satirization of the Mahabharata. The novel "deconstructs the myth of nationalist purity by recasting heroes as flawed modern politicians" (Ahmad 57). This claim emphasises Shashi Tharoor's postmodern and postcolonial narrative technique, in which he presents historical or mythic figures as flawed, politically driven people in order to undermine idealised nationalist narratives. By dissecting nationalist narratives, Tharoor challenges their sanctity and reveals the nuanced, ethically dubious character of political leadership in contemporary India. In order to bridge myth with current sociopolitical reality, he rewrites epic heroes as flawed modern politicians, reflecting his critique of power, corruption, and identity politics. Linda Hutcheon's concept of 'historiographic metafiction,' in which history and fiction converge to expose the

arbitrary character of reality, is consistent with Tharoor's blending of myth and history (Hutcheon 122). The aim, according to Tharoor himself, is to "tell the past as it might have been told if our myths and history were one, rather than as it was" (Tharoor xii).

Mukherjee's remark also indicates the intricacy of Tharoor's style. His use of language that veers between parody and prophecy, satire and solemnity, captures the complexity of Indian modernity. His mythic imagination keeps him grounded in the cultural past, while the sarcastic style enables him to maintain his scepticism of great narratives. This combination of myth and sarcasm is a prime example of what Gayatri Spivak refers to as 'strategic essentialism,' in which tradition is cited as a means of cultural empowerment rather than as a doctrine (Spivak 214). Harish Trivedi notes, "Tharoor's fiction is an act of remembrance and reinvention-an attempt to write history not as closure but as conversation. (Trivedi 145)" Rather than being a completed plot, Tharoor's fiction turns history into an ongoing dialogue. Through sarcasm, myth, and current relevance, his reinvention reinterprets the suppressed and lost elements of India's colonial and cultural past, while his act of recollection brings them back to life. By doing this, Tharoor challenges the idea that history is a static account of occurrences and instead approaches it as a dialogue between the past and present in which meaning is always being reshaped by memory and imagination. His writings, including *Riot* and *The Great Indian Novel*, are able to reveal the intricacies of national identity and challenge official historiography because of this dynamic methodology. Tharoor reclaims history as a cultural and moral discourse through this creative involvement, allowing for its renewal and reinterpretation.

Conclusion

History is not only documented but creatively reimagined to benefit the present in Shashi Tharoor's novel and non-fictional works, which stand as meaningful acts of cultural recall and reinvention. The Great Indian Novel, Show Business, Riot, and India: From Midnight to the Millennium are some of Tharoor's works that bridge the gap between colonial subjection and postcolonial self-awareness by reconstructing the past. His reimagining of myth and history gives a pluralistic, dialogic viewpoint that speaks to the richness of India's civilization and contradicts the colonial historiography's monolithic portrayal of the country's past. Tharoor breaks down the barriers between myth and reality, between tradition and modernity, by reinterpreting the Mahabharata as a metaphor for Indian politics or by contrasting modernism with mythic consciousness. This reveals the continuity of India's cultural growth.

Tharoor's approach to the past is inquisitive rather than sentimental. He reclaims tradition as a dynamic, adaptable force that shapes Indian identity in the contemporary world, rather than praising it blindly or writing it off as a reversal. While his narrative plurality validates the coexistence of various voices within India's socio-political discourse, his use of sarcasm, satire, and intertextuality highlights the errors inherent in both colonial and nationalist histories. By doing this, Tharoor represents a critical and creative kind of historical consciousness that aims to unearth buried tales and reframe them in the perspective of the present.

Tharoor's literary happenings present an introspective, hybrid, and intellectually independent image of India. His reinterpretation of history shows how important it is to look back on the past to shape a country's future consciousness. History is transformed by Tharoor from a static record of events into a dynamic field of interpretation where the past continuously influences the present and foreshadows the future through the mingling of legendary resonance

with contemporary sensibility. Thus, his writings perfectly capture the postcolonial movement to recover narrative sovereignty, which places tradition in the context of modernity as a persistent and changing form of cultural self-expression rather than as a remnant.

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