

Tradition and Modernity in the Fiction of Shashi Tharoor: A Study of Cultural Continuity and Transformation

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Abstract

This paper examines how Shashi Tharoor's fiction harmonizes India's traditional ethos with the challenges of modernity, reflecting the evolving consciousness of a nation shaped by colonial history and global transformation. Through a study of major works such as *The Great Indian Novel*, *Riot*, *Show Business*, and *An Era of Darkness*, the paper explores Tharoor's creative reworking of myth, history, and political discourse. Employing postcolonial and cultural theories drawn from T.S. Eliot, Jean-François Lyotard, Edward Said, and Homi Bhabha, it investigates Tharoor's negotiation between inherited cultural values and modern socio-political realities. The analysis demonstrates that Tharoor's fiction does not present tradition and modernity as opposing forces but as complementary dimensions of India's identity. His narrative strategies—irony, allegory, and metafiction—reveal that modernity gains depth only when rooted in the moral and philosophical frameworks of Indian tradition. Ultimately, Tharoor's literary vision advocates an integrative modernity in which India's ancient heritage remains a living, adaptive source for constructing a humane and pluralistic national consciousness.

Key words: Indian English Fiction, Postcolonial Identity, Cultural Continuity, Tradition And Modernity, Myth And History.

Shashi Tharoor stands as one of the most distinctive voices in contemporary Indian English literature. A diplomat, politician, historian, and novelist, Tharoor uses fiction as a lens through which the shifting cultural and political identities of postcolonial India are examined. His works capture the complex journey of a nation negotiating its past and present, integrating ancient traditions with the challenges of a globalized modern order. Through satire, allegory, and reworking of myth, Tharoor portrays India as a civilization in perpetual dialogue with itself—a civilization where tradition does not simply yield to modernity but evolves through it.

India's encounter with modernity has been unique, characterized by negotiations rather than ruptures. T.S. Eliot, in his essay "Tradition and the Individual Talent," conceptualizes tradition not as a static inheritance but as a continuing process in which the past and present mutually inform each other. Jean-François Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* further complicates this understanding by rejecting universal truths in favor of fragmented, localized narratives. These theoretical insights offer valuable frameworks for reading Tharoor's novels, which weave together mythic archetypes and contemporary realities to reflect the plurality of Indian experience. For Tharoor, writing becomes an act of cultural synthesis—an attempt to reinterpret India's ancient civilizational spirit for the modern age.

Tharoor's novels—*The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Show Business* (1992), and *Riot* (2001)—demonstrate his sustained engagement with the interplay between history and myth, tradition and progress. *The Great Indian Novel* reimagines the Mahabharata as a political allegory of India's freedom struggle and post-independence developments, where the epic heroes transform into

modern political figures. In this reworking, mythic time intersects with political history, illuminating moral and ideological continuities that span centuries. *Show Business* contrasts this moral depth with the superficial glamour of modern consumer culture, exposing the commodification of faith, politics, and art in a liberalized economy. Meanwhile, *Riot* serves as a commentary on communal violence and the contradictions of secular democracy in an era of globalization and media manipulation. Together, these texts trace India's evolving moral consciousness, from sacred duty to political cynicism, yet always grounded in a cultural memory that refuses

The central research problem of this study concerns Tharoor's mediation of India's dual identity—traditional yet modern, rooted yet cosmopolitan. The question arises: how does his fiction reconcile the deeply ingrained ethos of dharma and community with modern values of individuality, rationality, and progress? This paper aims to explore this reconciliation by analyzing Tharoor's use of myth, history, and narrative irony. Drawing on postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha, and Ashcroft) and modernity theory (Lyotard and Bauman), it seeks to understand how Tharoor positions India as both a continuation of its past and an active participant in global modernity.

Tharoor's literary imagination reveals a distinct vision of "integrative modernity," where the vitality of tradition strengthens rather than impedes progress. His use of parody, allusion, and metafiction allows him to challenge colonial narratives of modernity while affirming indigenous sources of wisdom. Thus, Tharoor's novels are not mere reinterpretations of myth but acts of cultural reclamation, portraying India's intellectual heritage as deeply relevant to contemporary moral and political dilemmas.

This study upholds the thesis that Tharoor's fiction reimagines India's past and present as a creative continuum where tradition and modernity coexist through reinterpretation of history, myth, and identity. His narratives exemplify a postcolonial cosmopolitanism that refuses cultural binaries, suggesting that the strength of Indian modernity lies precisely in its capacity to transform continuity into change.

The study of Shashi Tharoor's fiction has attracted a diverse range of scholarly interpretations that engage with history, politics, and the idea of Indian identity in a postcolonial context. Scholars such as Dr. V. S. Sankara Rao Chinnam examine Tharoor's approach to historical representation, noting that his narratives transform the past into a living discourse that reshapes national memory for a modern audience. Rao highlights how *The Great Indian Novel* revises the Mahabharata to critique Nehruvian politics and expose the moral paradoxes of Indian democracy.

Gita Patil emphasizes Tharoor's negotiation of cultural hybridity, arguing that his novels reflect both the cosmopolitan sensibility of a global intellectual and the indigenous traditions of Indian storytelling. Tapan Ghosh and Diksha Sharma further identify Tharoor's fiction as a literary space where the transition from the colonial to the postcolonial is continuously reinterpreted through irony and satire. Whereas early critics focused largely on Tharoor's retelling of national history, recent studies explore how his works embody postmodern techniques to represent fragmented identities and multiple realities within a heterogeneous nation.

Despite this growing body of scholarship, there remains a gap regarding the systematic exploration of the tradition-modernity paradigm across Tharoor's oeuvre. Much of the existing

scholarship concentrates on his reinterpretation of history, while few analyses fully address how Tharoor integrates ancient cultural narratives into the modern political and psychological fabric of his novels. This research seeks to address that gap by situating Tharoor's fiction within broader theoretical debates on postcolonial hybridity, cultural continuity, and modernity.

The framework for this study draws upon postcolonial, modernity, and cultural continuity theories. Postcolonial discourse, as articulated by Edward Said and Homi Bhabha, provides tools to understand cultural negotiation and hybridity. Said's critique of Orientalism reveals how colonial narratives constructed the East as inferior, while Bhabha's ideas of mimicry and hybridity open up possibilities for reclaiming agency through creative re-articulation. Tharoor's reinterpretations of myth and history function as acts of decolonization, reasserting the authority of indigenous narratives in defining Indian modernity.

Modernity, examined through Lyotard's *The Postmodern Condition* and Zygmunt Bauman's notion of "liquid modernity," explains the breakdown of singular truths and the coexistence of diverse realities. In Tharoor's works, this plurality manifests through shifting narrative voices and self-reflexive storytelling that acknowledge modernity's contradictions.

Cultural continuity theory complements these perspectives by situating Tharoor's fiction within India's long tradition of adaptive reinterpretation. Indian civilization has historically integrated new influences without losing its ethical and philosophical core. Tharoor continues this tradition by blending mythology with contemporary social realities, suggesting that India's identity evolves through reinterpretation rather than rupture.

Tharoor's fiction reconnects modern consciousness with the epic spirit of Indian civilization. The Great Indian Novel reimagines the Mahabharata not merely as a tale of gods and warriors, but as a political allegory of India's freedom struggle and postcolonial transformation. Characters such as Dhritarashtra and Yudhishtir become embodiments of moral and political dilemmas in modern governance. Through this intertextual engagement, Tharoor celebrates India's storytelling tradition while exposing how political ethics and dharma continue to shape modern India. Tradition here is not nostalgia but a mode of cultural self-recognition.

In contrast, *Show Business* and *Riot* project the faces of modern India—urbanization, capitalism, media spectacle, and the erosion of moral ideals. *Show Business* unfolds within the Bollywood film industry, transforming cinema into a metaphor for the performance of public life. The protagonist's disillusionment mirrors India's moral drift amid the pursuit of fame and material success. *Riot* explores communal violence and globalization through fragmented narratives that resemble media reports, highlighting the superficial understanding of identity fostered by modernity's mass communication. Tharoor uses irony to show how modern progress often distorts the ethical foundations inherited from tradition.

Tharoor's blending of myth and history bridges the gap between India's past and present. By using mythological frameworks to interpret political realities—Partition, Emergency, and nationalist politics—his novels reveal recurring cycles of moral conflict. Allegory, parody, and metafiction enable Tharoor to comment on the loss of ideological coherence in modern politics while affirming the timeless relevance of mythic paradigms in understanding human behavior. His approach transforms history into moral narrative, dissolving distinctions between mythical and historical time.

At the heart of Tharoor's fiction lies the question of identity in a postcolonial nation-state. His protagonists embody a hybrid sensibility—caught between inherited faith and rational modernity. This ambivalence mirrors India's broader struggle to balance its plural past with its aspirations for progress. Drawing from Bhabha's notion of hybridity, Tharoor proposes a vision of Indian identity that resists binaries and absorbs contradictions. His works suggest that the true essence of Indian modernity lies not in imitation of the West but in renewing its own moral and cultural imagination.

Shashi Tharoor's fiction demonstrates that Indian tradition is not a fixed inheritance but a living force that continually adapts to new realities. Through his innovative use of myth, allegory, and parody—especially visible in *The Great Indian Novel*—Tharoor illustrates how oral narratives and epic memories have shaped successive generations of Indian socio-political thought. By intertwining the Mahabharata with twentieth-century history, Tharoor not only underscores the relevance of ancient values such as dharma and karma, but also questions their significance in a modern democracy beset by corruption, media consumerism, and moral ambiguity.

His engagement with modernity is equally nuanced, challenging the notion that progress must undermine tradition or cultural ethics. In *Show Business and Riot*, Tharoor exposes the moral and psychological tensions of a rapidly globalizing India, using satire and fragmented narrative structures to reflect the instability and complexities of contemporary reality. His critique of colonial modernity in *An Era of Darkness* further reinforces the argument that authentic Indian progress must arise from indigenous cultural continuities rather than Western paradigms.

Tharoor's stylistic synthesis—marked by circular narration, metafiction, parody, and intertextuality—embodies the fusion of old and new that defines his vision of Indian identity. Tradition and modernity, for Tharoor, are not antagonists but dynamic partners in shaping India's self-understanding. Modernity becomes meaningful and sustainable only when anchored in ethical values and cultural memory.

Tharoor's works reconcile India's dual identity: ancient yet cosmopolitan, traditional yet progressive. He demonstrates that modernity does not inevitably enfeeble tradition, but instead can revitalize it through reinterpretation and creative integration. Tharoor's "integrative modernity" advocates a vision of progress that retains cultural depth and ethical grounding, resisting homogenizing global forces while welcoming pluralism and change. This approach remains highly pertinent for Indian English literature in the 21st century—where writers continue to balance innovation with cultural specificity, forging new forms out of different histories and sensibilities.

Further research might compare Tharoor's strategies with those of Salman Rushdie or Amitav Ghosh, or examine interdisciplinary currents linking politics, literature, and philosophy within the Indian context. The enduring appeal of Tharoor's novels lies in their refusal to choose between past and future, instead enacting a cultural dialogue that transforms trauma, legacy, and aspiration into a fluid, resilient Indian identity.

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