
Myth, Satire, and Narrative Voice: Exploring Language and Storytelling in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a richly layered text that reimagines the Indian epic *Mahabharata* within the framework of India's modern political history. This paper explores the interplay of myth, satire, and narrative voice in the novel, analyzing how Tharoor employs mythological allusions to critique postcolonial politics and national identity. The narrative voice, both playful and ironic, functions as a bridge between the epic tradition and contemporary socio-political commentary. Tharoor's satire challenges historical narratives and exposes the absurdities of political leadership, governance, and bureaucracy. Through an intricate fusion of myth and history, the novel constructs a metafictional space that blurs fact and fiction, prompting readers to reconsider the stories that shape national consciousness. This study examines how language, parody, and intertextuality enhance the novel's political critique and cultural resonance, asserting Tharoor's work as a seminal contribution to Indian English literature and postmodern historiographic fiction.

Key Words: Historical Fiction, Intertextuality, Myth, Satire, Epic, Postcolonial

Introduction

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* stands as a unique literary achievement in postcolonial Indian literature, offering a blisteringly satirical yet affectionate reimagining of twentieth-century Indian history through the lens of the *Mahabharata*, India's foundational epic. First published in 1989, the novel is much more than a simple retelling—it is a complex interplay of myth, politics, history, and language, resulting in a richly layered narrative that bridges ancient tradition and contemporary reality. Tharoor's mastery of language and narrative technique underpins his profound exploration of Indian sociopolitical identity, memory, and nationhood. This research paper examines the distinctive language, narrative strategies, and artful storytelling that animate Tharoor's magnum opus.

The Language of *The Great Indian Novel*

At the core of Tharoor's narrative style is a vibrant satirical voice that undercuts reverence for historical and mythological figures alike. The tone of the novel is irreverent, witty, and, at times, mock-epic, enabling Tharoor to critique the sanctity with which Indian history and myth are often approached. The language is striking for its puns, playfulness, and frequent use of parody. Tharoor lampoons the solemnity of both Western and Indian literary traditions with allusions to canonical texts, such as works by E.M. Forster and Rudyard Kipling, embedding these within the Indian context. The effect is to subvert the epic and demystify the political icons of Indian Independence.

Intertextual Allusions

Intertextuality is pervasive throughout *The Great Indian Novel*, with Tharoor drawing liberally from the *Mahabharata*, other Indian epics, Western literature, and contemporary political discourse. Tharoor's prose is a palimpsest—a text written atop the traces of other stories and histories—which demands an active and discerning reader. References and parodies of Shakespeare, Gandhi, and political speeches operate simultaneously as homage and critique. This layering deepens the novel's themes, playing with the idea that history and myth continually rewrite one another.

Irony, Wordplay, and Mockery

The language in the novel is ironic, peppered with wordplay, neologisms, and bilingual puns. Tharoor's prose oscillates between high literary English and colloquial Indianisms, reflecting the hybrid cultural fabric of modern India. Characters' names often possess dual meanings, with mythological and political echoes; for example, Gangaji recalls both Bhishma and Gandhi, while Priya Duryodhani blends the mythic Duryodhana with a satirical nod to Indira Gandhi. The result is a linguistic landscape alive with the fluidity of Indian English, mock solemnity, and subversive wit.

Destabilizing Language and Constructed History

A significant facet of Tharoor's language is its foregrounding of the constructed nature of narrative and history. Through an unreliable, digressive narrator—Ved Vyas—the novel constantly draws attention to its status as fiction, shaping the reader's awareness of how language can validate or destabilize "truth." The narrator frequently reflects on his own storytelling, questioning the accuracy and motives underlying historical remembrance.

Myth Transposed onto History

The most conspicuous narrative device in *The Great Indian Novel* is the transposition of the *Mahabharata*'s narrative structure and cast onto twentieth-century Indian history, particularly the freedom movement, partition, and post-independence politics. Tharoor retains the *Mahabharata*'s tripartite division—mythic origins, epic conflict, and aftermath—organizing his novel into eighteen "books" mirroring the epic, and repurposes iconic episodes (e.g., the disrobing of Draupadi becomes the stripping of democracy). This myth-to-history mapping is not

merely ornamental. It enables deep allegory—characters and events are both specific (referencing real historical figures and incidents) and archetypal (echoing timeless struggles of ambition, duty, betrayal, and conflict). For instance, Bhishma's vow of celibacy becomes, in Tharoor's reimagining, Ganga Datta's renunciation for the sake of the nation's future, mapping Gandhi's ethical absolutism and personal sacrifice.

The choice of Ved Vyas as the narrator is a masterstroke: modeled after Vyasa, the mythical author of the *Mahabharata*, he literally dictates the epic of “modern India” to his scribe, Ganapathi. This device foregrounds the act of storytelling itself, making the process—and unreliability—of narration a central theme. The narrator frequently addresses the reader or Ganapathi directly, admits to omissions, errors, and selective recounting, and queries his own interpretive choices. This continual self-reflexivity exposes the multiplicity of truths in history, parodies official histories and biographies, and encourages the reader to question, not simply absorb, narratives.

Tharoor employs temporal distortion—shifting seamlessly between mythic time, personal reminiscence, and historical present—to collapse the boundaries between past and present. This allows him to suggest the cyclical recurrence of patterns—of betrayal, idealism, and power politics—in Indian society. The structure itself is cyclical: the novel opens and closes at points of narrative convergence, hinting at the endless rebirth of India's struggles. While Ved Vyas is the central narrator, the novel is replete with multiple narrative voices, directly and indirectly. The first-person narration frequently incorporates oral storytelling traditions, mock-epic digressions, and confessions. Dialogues are often staged as debates, rich in rhetorical flourishes reminiscent of classical Sanskrit discourse but laced with contemporary jargon and wit. Occasionally, Tharoor lets other characters or the scribe Ganapathi offer brief perspectives, further fracturing the narrative center and challenging monologic history.

Satire,Parody,Allegory

A central artifice of Tharoor's storytelling is the persistent use of satire and parody to both critique and humanize historical events and figures. By exaggerating the foibles and idiosyncrasies of Indian politicians and bureaucrats, Tharoor reduces them from the pedestal of reverence to the realm of flawed, mythic mortals. The novel's allegory—the mapping of political figures onto archetypal epic roles—allows for multiple, often contradictory readings: Indira Gandhi as both a charismatic leader and despotic schemer; Gandhi as both national father and tragic idealist. Tharoor weaves a dense tapestry of allusions to Western and Indian literature, cinema, pop culture, and politics. This intertextual playfulness reinforces the hybridity of Indian identity, encourages critical engagement with both “official” and “folk” versions of history, and serves as a commentary on the colonial legacy embedded in Indian English writing.

Characters and events operate as symbols: Draupadi as democracy, Ganga Datta as the conscience of the nation, Priya Duryodhani as “will to power,” the disrobing of Draupadi as the subversion of democratic ideals. Personification is used to conflate individual character with national or institutional identity, allowing Tharoor to comment on abstract themes (dharma, power, justice) while keeping his narrative grounded in lived experience.

Rewriting History, Reclaiming the Epic

The Great Indian Novel is fundamentally a work of postcolonial subversion. By reclaiming the *Mahabharata*—a text central to Hindu and Indian cultural identity—and reimagining the nation’s story on its template, Tharoor both asserts a postcolonial literary voice and interrogates what constitutes “Indianness.” His narrative challenges received myths, exposing the arbitrariness and constructedness of both colonial and indigenous traditions. Tharoor’s narrative constantly deconstructs the sanctity of both the mythic epic and the historical narrative, refusing to treat either as totalizing or sacrosanct. Instead, history is shown as episodic, contested, and, often, absurd. The *Mahabharata*’s “elastic” form—capable of incorporating philosophy, politics, folklore, and contradiction—is used by Tharoor as a vessel for parody, satire, and national introspection.

A recurring theme in both language and storytelling is the ancient ideal of dharma (righteousness or duty). Tharoor’s narrative repeatedly tests this concept, presenting characters faced with impossible choices and conflicting allegiances. The mockery and irony that suffuse the novel are not simply iconoclastic—they draw attention to the complexities of duty, legacy, and national morality as India negotiates its self-understanding in a global world. This tension gives the novel much of its moral force and tragicomedy.

Conclusion

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* is a tour de force of language and storytelling, a work that bridges mythic history and postcolonial modernity with wit, irony, and literary innovation. His language is supple, playful, and deeply intertextual, enabling him to mount a sophisticated critique of both Indian tradition and contemporary realities. The art of storytelling in the novel is inseparable from its linguistic bravura: myth, satire, history, and personal meditation converge in a layered narrative that is at once a national epic, political allegory, and literary game. By continually questioning the authority of both history and myth, and by dramatizing the complexities of Indian identity in a postcolonial age, Tharoor’s masterpiece not only entertains but also induces deep reflection on the meaning and making of the nation. Its language and storytelling remain fresh—challenging, subversive, and enduringly relevant.

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