
**Fluid Selves and Cultural Hybridity in Postmodern Indian English Literature:
A Study of Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil**

¹**Mahesh Hooli**

Research Scholar

²**Dr. Soumya Tiwari**

Asst. Professor, Manasarovar Global University, Bhopal

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Abstract

Postmodernism, in a literary sense, breaks away from the shackles of conventional methods of storytelling and embraces narrative techniques like fragmentation, hybridity, and unstable identity. Since the uproar of World War II was over, writers across the globe used these literary techniques to convey fragmentation and disillusionment. In India, this wave of postmodernism was seen in the form of a departure from realist narratives and moving forward with embracing fragmentation, irony, and intertextuality to reflect the plural and heterogeneous character of contemporary India. This research paper aims to explore the works of writers such as Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil and their underexplored narrative techniques, such as fragmentation, hybridity, and fluid identity.

These postmodern narrative techniques are employed by the writers to emphasize the impact of postmodernism. The research paper employs qualitative research methodology, which includes close reading, comparative method, and thematic analysis of the texts to point out the postmodern narratives. Through a qualitative and comparative thematic analysis, the research investigates how Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie* and *Cuckold*, and Thayil's *Narcopolis* employ postmodern narrative strategies to deconstruct fixed notions of selfhood and nationhood. The research engages with Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and postmodern ideas of "identity in flux" to examine how Indian English fiction redefines selfhood. The study identifies that these texts situate fluid and hybrid identities, where characters navigate between tradition and modernity, stability and change, and the local and the global. The findings contribute to broader debates within postcolonial and postmodern literary studies, demonstrating how Indian English fiction reimagines the self in an age of globalization and cultural plurality. The study thus underscores the evolving nature of Indian identity as simultaneously fragmented, hybrid, and multifaceted.

Keywords: Postmodernism, Identity, Cultural Hybridity, Indian English Literature, Tharoor, Nagarkar, Thayil.

Introduction

Postmodernism, in literature, is a period that emerged as a reaction to the prior age of modernism. Postmodernism is typically traced back to the late 1940s and 1950s in the postwar context of disillusionment and alienation that was brought forth by World War II. Characterized by its rejection of traditional narrative forms, postmodern literature includes elements such as fragmentation, unreliable narrators, and metafiction, which highlight the self-reflexivity of storytelling. This movement is marked by a disoriented structure, lacking clear leaders and cohesive direction, and embraces chaos and disorder in both its themes and styles. It included intertextuality, where texts reference one another, and a blending of "high" and "low" culture, pushing boundaries even further than modernist experimentation. Major themes prevalent in postmodern works encompass feelings of alienation, anxiety, and a sense of meaninglessness in the human condition, as well as disoriented and fluid identity. Indian English Literature occupies a distinct space in the realm of global Anglophone literature, drawing narratives from the experiences of people in India, the political, societal and economic upheaval faced by the country and the delightful multi-coloured society. Indian English Literature emerges from a dynamic space of multiculturalism, hence, the resistance to singular narratives of identity and the foundation of plurality is plausible. In Indian English literature, the postmodern narrative techniques are utilised to question and destabilize the essential notions prevalent. It also leads to an ambiguous sense of the self and identity, leading to multiplicity of identity which is fluid. Within this bedrock of postmodernism, Indian English fiction becomes a site of cultural negotiation, which is, a dialogic process where the traditional and the modern, the local and the global, interact incessantly. Writers like Tharoor, Nagarkar and Thayil explore how fluid and hybrid identities emerge from this negotiation, revealing India as a playing ground of intersecting selves rather than a singular cultural entity. Hence, the Indian English literature is not limited to the social, economic, and political upheavals but also dissects the creative discourse of plurality and self-invention. While previous scholarship on postmodern Indian English literature has primarily focused on canonical figures such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh, there remains a notable dearth of research on writers like Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil. Their collective contribution to the exploration of identity and cultural hybridity within

Postmodern frameworks has been comparatively underexamined. This study enhances the understanding of how postmodern narrative techniques are localized within the Indian context, revealing the ways in which global literary forms adapt to indigenous cultural and historical realities. By examining the intersection of postcolonial and postmodern sensibilities, the research bridges two critical discourses and underscores how Indian English fiction redefines notions of selfhood, culture, and nationhood through hybridity and narrative innovation.

Literature Review

Major literature on postmodernism and post colonialism highlights its key characteristics that define the gist of the literary movement. Much of the literature available either focuses on post colonialism and postmodernism in isolation, and even when a handful of literature inspects the relationship of postmodernism and post colonialism in Indian English literature, it is done through the spectacle of mainstream, Anglo-recognized Indian writers like Salman Rushdie, Arundhati Roy, etc. In "Colonialism and the Postcolonial Condition," Rosemary Jolly discusses how colonialism fractures cultural unity, leading to psychic and social disintegration among colonized peoples. She critiques the notion of returning to precolonial cultural purity, arguing that such a goal is unrealistic due to the profound ruptures caused by colonialism. These concepts have been explored and well-documented in the works of Salman Rushdie, but a larger chunk of writers still remain under the shadow, underexplored.

The perspective pointed out by Jolly is pertinent to the study of postmodern Indian English literature, as it underscores the complexities of identity formation and fluidity in postcolonial contexts. Authors like Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil navigate these complexities by employing postmodern narrative strategies to depict fragmented and hybrid identities, reflecting the lasting impacts of colonial histories on the notion of selfhood. In his article "Separated by Common Ground? Bringing (Post)Development and (Post)Colonialism Together" (2006), David Simon argues that the integration of postcolonial and development studies can bridge gaps between theory and practice by addressing power asymmetries embedded in development policy. He emphasizes the need to critically examine the Western-centric development prototype through a postcolonial lens, prompting more context-aware and socially just approaches in development interventions. While most literature centers around Identity in "Western" terms, Simon points out the obvious fact about the lack of intersection in post colonialism research.

In his essay "Post colonialism and Postmodernism," Ato Quayson examines the complexities of integrating postcolonial and postmodern frameworks, noting that while both challenge mainstream narratives, they operate within different contexts and concerns. Quayson highlights that postmodernism, often perceived as apolitical and rooted in Western crises of subjectivity, may not resonate with postcolonial contexts where pressing issues of economic, political, and cultural inequalities prevail. He suggests that while postmodernism's emphasis on deconstruction and pluralism can offer insights, it must be critically engaged with to avoid disempowering postcolonial discourse.

In the context of this study, Quayson's analysis underscores the necessity of critically applying postmodern techniques to postcolonial literature. Authors like Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil employ postmodern narrative strategies to depict fluid and hybrid identities, reflecting the complexities of postcolonial experience. However, as

Quayson cautions, these strategies must be employed thoughtfully to ensure they contribute to, rather than obscure, the emancipatory goals of postcolonial discourse.

Dipanjoy Mukherjee's 2025 study, *Postcolonial Narratives and Identity Formation in Contemporary Literature*, examines how postcolonial texts reclaim histories and articulate cultural identities in the aftermath of colonial rule. The article highlights how authors negotiate hybridity, displacement, and language politics, reflecting the ongoing struggle for self-definition in globalized and postcolonial contexts. This perspective is relevant to the study of Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil. Mukherjee's insights provide a valuable framework for understanding how postcolonial literature uses narrative form and thematic complexity to represent fractured identities and cultural negotiation.

The 2025 research paper *Identity and Hybridity in Postcolonial Narratives* by Abhishikta et al. examines how colonial legacies shape personal, cultural, and national identities, emphasizing the fluid and complex nature of postcolonial selfhood. Drawing on Bhabha's theory of hybridity, the paper highlights how literature reflects the negotiation between indigenous traditions and colonial influences, presenting hybridity as both a site of resistance and creative transformation. This perspective is relevant to Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil, whose postmodern narrative strategies depict fluid, hybrid identities and explore the intricate processes of cultural negotiation in postcolonial India.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism* conceptualizes postmodern literature as self-reflexive, ironic, and deeply engaged with the processes of historical and cultural representation. In the context of this study, her framework elaborates how Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil employ postmodern techniques to destabilize fixed notions of identity and represent cultural hybridity through postmodern techniques like parody, intertextuality, and metafiction.

In examining identity and cultural hybridity in postmodern Indian English literature, theoretical insights from Homi K. Bhabha and Linda Hutcheon provide crucial analytical frameworks. Bhabha's concept of hybridity, as outlined in *The Location of Culture*, emphasizes the "third space" where cultural interaction produces new, negotiated identities, challenging fixed notions of selfhood. This framework is particularly relevant to postcolonial contexts, where historical fissures and cultural intersections shape complex, multifaceted identities. Hutcheon's postmodern theory, articulated in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, highlights self-reflexivity, irony, and the questioning of grand narratives as defining features of postmodern literature. Together, these perspectives highlight how authors like Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil employ postmodern narrative strategies, such as metafiction, parody, and intertextuality, to represent fluid, hybrid identities and explore the negotiation of cultural multiplicity in contemporary Indian English literature.

The works of Shashi Tharoor (*The Great Indian Novel*), Kiran Nagarkar (*Ravan and Eddie, Cuckold*), and Jeet Thayil (*Narcopolis*) remain underexplored in scholarly discourse, despite their significant engagement with postmodern narrative techniques. These novels depict fluid, hybrid identities, negotiating between tradition and modernity, local and global influences, and personal and collective histories on an intricate level. By employing strategies such as metafiction, irony, intertextuality, and fragmented narration, these authors critically examine the complexities of selfhood and cultural multiplicity in contemporary Indian English literature, offering rich insights into postcolonial and postmodern intersections that have yet to receive stable academic attention.

Analysis of selected works

This study adopts a qualitative, analytical, and comparative literary research design to examine the representation of fluid identities and cultural hybridity in selected postmodern Indian English novels. The data sources include Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Kiran Nagarkar's *Ravan and Eddie and Cuckold*, and Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis*, selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevance to the research focus. The study employs tools such as close reading, thematic coding, and textual analysis to systematically explore postmodern narrative strategies and their role in building hybrid and fluid identities.

The research procedure involves a step-by-step textual analysis, beginning with the identification of markers of identity and hybridity within each novel, followed by thematic categorization and comparative evaluation across texts. The independent variables include postmodern narrative techniques, such as fragmentation, intertextuality, satire, and parody, while the dependent variable is the representation of fluid identity and cultural hybridity. Data analysis is conducted through thematic and comparative approaches, identifying recurring patterns, narrative strategies, and thematic structures that articulate hybrid identities.

In the landscape of postmodern Indian fiction, identity ceases to be an essence and instead becomes a negotiation, a dynamic process of translation between multiple cultural, linguistic, and historical frames. The works of Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil exemplify this phenomenon of fluid selves and cultural hybridity, revealing how the postcolonial Indian subject is constructed within the shifting terrains of mythology, modernity, colonial memory, and globalization. Homi K. Bhabha's theorization of hybridity, articulated in *The Location of Culture*, conceptualizes this condition as a "third space of enunciation", a liminal zone where fixed identities dissolve and new, hybrid subjectivities are formed. Linda Hutcheon, in *A Poetics of Postmodernism*, similarly argues that postmodern narratives reconfigure the past through irony, parody, and historiographic metafiction, thereby contesting master narratives and opening spaces for marginalized histories. Together, Bhabha and Hutcheon provide the theoretical scaffolding for understanding how Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil write the postcolonial Indian self as a fluid, polyphonic, and hybrid construct.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) represents this hybridity by rewriting the *Mahabharata* as a political allegory of modern Indian history. The text is self-consciously parodic, what Hutcheon would call "historiographic metafiction", in that it both supports and subverts the epic narrative. Tharoor fuses myth with political history, sacred language with bureaucratic English, and epic heroes with historical figures, creating what Bhabha would identify as an "interstitial" discourse, neither purely mythic nor purely historical, but a hybrid re-creation of both. When Gangaji, the Gandhian figure modeled after Bhishma, declares that "freedom is not worth having if it does not include the freedom to make mistakes," Tharoor transforms a moral axiom of the epic into a democratic reflection on self-determination. The language here oscillates between the moral decorum of the *Mahabharata* and the rhetoric of modern politics, producing a hybrid that unsettles both traditions. Similarly, when the narrator insists that "in our history, as in our epics, there are no permanent heroes and no permanent villains."

Twilight never lasts long in India, but its advent was like opening time at the pubs our rulers had left behind. The shadows fell and spirits rose; the sharp odour of quinine tonic, invented by lonely planters to drown and justify their solitary gins, mingled with the scent of frangipani from their leafy, insect-ridden gardens, and the soothing clink of ice against glass was only disturbed by the occasional slap of a frustrated palm against a reddening spot just vacated by an anglovoracious mosquito. (Tharoor, 1989)

Tharoor dismantles the binaries of good and evil central to nationalist historiography, replacing them with a postmodern irony that recognizes multiplicity and contradiction. His English prose, saturated with Sanskrit allusions and mythic idioms, becomes an act of mimicry, a Bhabhaesque strategy that mimics the personality of the colonizer while displacing its authority. The result is a text that embodies hybridity at every level.

If Tharoor hybridizes myth and history, Kiran Nagarkar hybridizes social and linguistic realities. In *Ravan and Eddie* (1995), the Bombay chawl becomes a microcosm of India's cultural heterogeneity. The novel's world is one of constant negotiation between religion, language, and class. Nagarkar's narrator describes the chawl as "a Babel where Marathi, Konkani, Hindi, English, and the sounds of the radio cohabited in one eternal quarrel." The polyphonic soundscape of this line mirrors the cacophony of postcolonial urban life, where hybridity is not an exception but a condition of survival. Ravan, a lower-caste Hindu boy, and Eddie, a working-class Catholic, grow up in the same building, divided by walls yet bound by circumstance.

What did she think about behind that tranquil face of hers? Whatever the provocation, she never clenched her jaws, swore or got angry. Did she watch everything from a distance, as if even her own life was happening to someone else? Nobody could see it but instead of a face, she wore a mask. No, Ravan wanted to rephrase that. What he and everybody else saw was the mask, not what went on inside. (Nagarkar, 1995)

Their identities, shaped by their encounters with each other and the city's many contradictions, resist any stable definition. This instability is what Bhabha calls the "inbetween," a site of ambivalence where subjects are constantly translating themselves across cultural borders. Nagarkar's use of Bombay slang, code-switching between English and Marathi, and his comic irreverence toward religion perform what Hutcheon terms "the irony of doubleness", a postmodern device that mocks and mirrors cultural norms simultaneously.

In Nagarkar's *Cuckold* (1997), hybridity is no longer social but spiritual and psychological. Set in sixteenth-century Rajasthan, the novel retells the story of the Rajput prince who was married to the poet-saint Mira Bai. The prince's voice, introspective and wounded, registers the tension between masculinity and transcendence. He confesses, "I am the cuckold of the century, but perhaps that is the price one pays for being born into the wrong myth."

You would be entirely justified if you spent your entire life railing against your misfortune. But there is another option. Rise above your fate. Internalize your calamity and give it a heroic dimension as Bhishma did. It was a thoughtful disquisition and its central insight applied to all of us since there is no man born who is not handicapped in one way or another. So it is up to us to make the best of a botched job. (Nagarkar, 1997)

This self-reflexive lament fuses history, myth, and psychology into a single utterance, revealing how the postmodern subject is caught between competing discourses, the heroic code of the warrior, and the devotional poetics of bhakti. The prince's hybridity lies in his divided selfhood, his inability to inhabit a pure identity within the rigid frameworks of gender and faith. His narrative, filled with anachronisms and ironic self-awareness, enacts what Hutcheon describes as the postmodern re-visioning of the past, a process that "replays but with a difference." The historical novel becomes, in Nagarkar's hands, a space of contestation where Indian tradition is rewritten through the idiom of modern alienation.

Jeet Thayil's *Narcopolis* (2012) shifts hybridity into the terrain of globalized modernity. The novel's Bombay is a cosmopolis where East and West, ancient and modern, coexist in a haze of addiction. Thayil's narrative voice, dreamlike and non-linear, announces at the outset: "Bombay, which obliterated its own name, which forgets everything, even its own crimes." The city's amnesia mirrors the fluidity of its inhabitants, who drift between identities and languages. The character of Dimple, a transgender sex worker and addict, becomes the novel's emblem of fluid selfhood. She tells the narrator, "I was made in India, but not of it," capturing the essence of Bhabha's hybrid subject, one who inhabits the borderlands of belonging and alienation. Dimple's gender transition, her exposure to Persian mysticism through Mr. Lee, and her disillusionment with the materialism of Bombay all mark her as a postcolonial wanderer, always becoming, never fixed. The opium den where

the novel unfolds functions as what Bhabha might call a “third space,” an intersectional zone where cultural and bodily identities dissolve. Thayil’s language, English infused with Hindi slang, American beats, and mystical undertones, enacts the hybridity it describes. His prose, rhythmic and recursive, aligns with Hutcheon’s idea of postmodern irony as “complicitous critique,” for it seduces the reader with beauty while revealing decay beneath it.

In these novels, the postmodern Indian self is a site of perpetual contestation between myth and modernity, faith and skepticism, tradition and change. As Bhabha observes, hybridity “is not a third term that resolves the tension between two cultures... it is the ‘thirdspace’ which enables other positions to emerge.” This emergence is what Hutcheon would call postmodernism’s irony, its capacity to “problematize the very possibility of meaning while asserting it.” Through parody, intertextuality, and the collision of temporalities, Tharoor, Nagarkar, and Thayil create hybrid narratives that refuse closure, embodying the restless pluralism of postcolonial India. Their characters, like their narratives, live in the flux of becoming, not trapped in history, but rewriting it from within.

Conclusion

The study concludes that the works of Shashi Tharoor, Kiran Nagarkar, and Jeet Thayil collectively portray identity as fluid, hybrid, and socially situated within the fabric of postcolonial and postmodern India. Through their distinct narrative techniques, these authors capture the multiplicity and fragmentation inherent in contemporary selfhood. Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* reconstructs myth and history through parody and intertextuality, blurring the lines between the epic and the political. Nagarkar’s *Ravan and Eddie* and *Cuckold* negotiate hybridity through contrasting social and temporal settings, portraying identity as a continuous process of negotiation between faith, sexuality, and morality. Thayil’s *Narcopolis*, set in the chaotic underbelly of urban India, translates postmodern alienation into a form of spiritual hybridity, reflecting the dismantling of stable identities in a globalized world. Collectively, these narratives articulate an Indian form of postmodernism, rooted in historical consciousness yet deeply engaged with global aesthetics.

Practically, this research contributes to the pedagogy and criticism of Indian English literature by providing frameworks for analyzing postmodern narrative strategies such as fragmentation, metafiction, and intertextuality. Theoretically, the study extends the conversation between postcolonial and postmodern thought by demonstrating how Indian literature transforms these Western critical paradigms into context-specific expressions of cultural negotiation, historical revisionism, and ethical complexity. By situating these authors within the broader discourse of postmodern Indian writing, the research underscores their role in shaping a distinctively Indian postmodern aesthetic.

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