

**Re-writing the Empire: Postcolonial Aspects in Shashi Tharoor's  
*The Great Indian Novel***

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**Abstract:**

Post-colonial theory provides a critical framework for examining the enduring cultural, political, and economic impacts of colonialism on former colonies and their peoples. This research paper explores the postcolonial aspects embedded in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, a satirical retelling of the Indian independence movement mapped onto the ancient epic, the *Mahabharata*. By utilizing foundational postcolonial concepts from scholars such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Frantz Fanon, and Gayatri Spivak, this paper analyzes how Tharoor subverts Western colonial discourse, deconstructs the imperial gaze, and illustrates the complexities of hybrid identity and mimicry in postcolonial India. Furthermore, the paper compares Tharoor's linguistic and narrative strategies with the approaches of African writers like Chinua Achebe, demonstrating how the English language is appropriated to dismantle the colonizer's historical narratives. Ultimately, Tharoor's work exposes the tragic consequences of imperial policies, such as the "divide and rule" strategy, while celebrating the resilience and multifaceted identity of the newly independent nation represented by the allegorical figure of Draupadi Mokrasī (Democracy).

**Keywords:** Postcolonial theory, Shashi Tharoor, The Great Indian Novel, Orientalism, Hybridity, Mimicry, Decolonization, British Raj, Cultural Imperialism.

**Introduction**

Post-colonial theory emerged prominently in the latter half of the twentieth century as a critical framework to interrogate the enduring effects of colonialism on former colonies and their societies. Rooted in the intellectual contributions of thinkers such as Frantz Fanon, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, the theory provides analytical tools to examine how colonial power dynamics persist in shaping identities, knowledge systems, and social hierarchies long after the formal end of colonial administrations. Its primary objective

is to deconstruct and critique the narratives established by colonial rulers, which often depicted colonized peoples as inferior and perpetuated stereotypes that justified colonial domination. By focusing on themes such as hybridity, mimicry, and otherness, post-colonial theory challenges the binaries established by colonial discourse and emphasizes the complex, often contradictory nature of post-colonial identities.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* stands as a quintessential postcolonial text that reclaims indigenous history and myth to tell the story of modern India. Taking its title from the ancient epic the *Mahabharata* where Maha means great and Bharata means India the novel asserts that the essential *Mahabharata* is whatever is relevant to the contemporary era. Through a satirical and allegorical blending of mythological figures with twentieth-century political leaders (such as Gangaji representing Mahatma Gandhi, Dhritarashtra representing Jawaharlal Nehru, and Karna representing Mohammad Ali Jinnah), Tharoor offers a counter-narrative to British imperial history. Similar to how post-colonial literature seeks to reclaim the voices and identities of those who were marginalized and oppressed by colonial narratives, Tharoor's novel challenges the legitimacy of the British Raj and critiques the lingering effects of colonialism, including economic exploitation and the trauma of Partition. This paper explores these postcolonial aspects through two main lenses: the subversion of colonial discourse and history, and the exploration of hybridity, mimicry, and national identity.

### **Subverting Colonial Discourse and History**

A central tenet of post-colonial theory is the dismantling of the Western "imperial gaze," which historically turned human beings and the environment into mirror images of itself, while defining the colonized subject as a fundamentally different and inferior "Other". Edward Said's foundational text, *Orientalism*, advanced post-colonial theory by analyzing how Western literature and scholarship constructed the Orient as an exotic, backward, and inferior counterpart to the rational, civilized West. Said argued that these representations were deeply intertwined with the power structures of colonialism, serving to legitimize and maintain Western dominance and colonial ambitions.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor aggressively subverts this Orientalist discourse by turning the satirical gaze back onto the British colonizers. Instead of presenting the British administrators as benevolent bearers of a "civilizing mission", Tharoor depicts them as unimaginative, pompous, and often absurd figures who fail to comprehend the complexity of the nation they are ruling. Tharoor strips the colonial masters of their self-proclaimed superiority, as seen in the narrator's scathing reflection on British administrators:

The truth is that the average British colonial administrator was a pompous mediocrity whose nose was so often in the air that he tripped over his own feet. (It was just as well that so many of them had long noses, Ganapathi, for they could rarely see beyond them.) In the process, they made decisions that provoked visceral and lasting reactions. Don't forget,

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Ganapathi, that it is to one British colonial policy-maker or another that we owe the Boxer Rebellion, the Mau Mau insurrection, the Boer War, and the Boston Tea Party. The British were the only people in history crass enough to make revolutionaries out of Americans. That took insensitivity and stupidity on quite a stupendous scale - qualities they could hardly keep out of their rule over our country. (Tharoor 34)

This satirical evisceration aligns with the postcolonial objective of revealing the true picture of colonization, much like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, which debunked Western propaganda that the European colonial enterprise was based on humanitarian grounds. Achebe utilized the English language—the colonizer's own language—to challenge the dominant Western colonial discourse and to project a civilized Africa. Similarly, Tharoor appropriates English to articulate a distinctly Indian historical experience, proving that one does not need to abandon the colonizer's language to decolonize the mind, provided the language is used to dismantle imperial myths.

Tharoor does not shy away from the brutal and violent realities of colonial subjugation. He vividly recreates the trauma of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre through the allegorical "Bibigarh Gardens Massacre" led by Colonel Rudyard. The horrifying clinical nature of colonial violence is exposed as the narrator recounts how the soldiers "loaded and fired their rifles coldly, clinically, without haste or passion or sweat or anger, resting their weapons against the tops of the brick walls so thoughtfully built in Shantanu's enlightened reign and emptying their magazines into the human beings before them with trained precision" (Tharoor 81). Tharoor uses this event to highlight the systemic evil of colonialism, noting that "It was not Rudyard who had to be condemned, not even his actions, but the system that permitted his actions to occur. In allowing Indians to realize this lay the true madness of the Hastinapur Massacre. It became a symbol of the worst of what colonialism could come to mean" (Tharoor 82). This echoes Aimé Césaire's assertion that the European colonial enterprise was a "collective hypocrisy" and an imperialist assault rather than a philanthropic endeavor.

Furthermore, Tharoor addresses the severe economic dimensions of colonialism, an aspect heavily analyzed in post-colonial theory which examines how colonial exploitation established patterns of dependency that continue to disadvantage former colonies. Through the narrator Ved Vyas, Tharoor passionately indicts the British economic drain on India during incidents like the Budge Budge jute-mill strike:

The British killed the Indian artisan, they created the Indian 'landless labourer', they exported our full-employment and they invented our poverty. It is difficult for you, living now with the evidence of that poverty around you, taking it for granted as a fact of life, to conceive of an India that was not poor, not unjust, not wretched. But that was how India was before the British came, or why would they have come? Do you think the merchants and

adventurers and traders of the East India Company would have first sailed to a land of poverty and misery? No, Ganapathi, they came to an India that was fabulously rich and prosperous, they came in search of wealth and profit, and they took what they could take, leaving Indians to wallow in their leavings. (Tharoor 67)

By highlighting the extraction of wealth and the imposition of absurd laws—satirized brilliantly through the "Mango Tax" (an allegory for the Salt Tax)—Tharoor re-writes the historical narrative to center the exploitation and the subsequent Indian resistance led by figures like Gangaji (Mahatma Gandhi), whose non-violent civil disobedience exposed the moral bankruptcy of the British Raj.

### **Hybridity, Mimicry, and the National Identity**

Another significant dimension of postcolonial theory present in the novel is the exploration of identity, particularly through Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of hybridity and mimicry. Bhabha explores the fluid and often contradictory nature of post-colonial identities, which are shaped by the intersections of local and colonial influences. Colonialism imposed foreign values, languages, and education systems, creating a profound disruption to the colonized people's sense of self. Frantz Fanon, in his seminal work *Black Skin, White Masks*, delved into the psychological effects of colonization, showing how colonialism imposes racial hierarchies and creates a sense of inferiority, forcing the colonized to navigate a split identity or "double consciousness".

In *The Great Indian Novel*, this psychological and cultural alienation is embodied in the character of Dhritarashtra, the blind visionary representing Jawaharlal Nehru. Dhritarashtra is the quintessential product of colonial education, a man who "found education in India a harrowing experience, which was, no doubt, why he was in due course sent to Eton. The British public school system fitted the young man to a T" (Tharoor 49). He returns from King's College, Cambridge, as a "Fabian Socialist", imbued with Western political philosophies that he struggles to map onto the Indian reality. His political vision is clouded by his Westernized intellectualism; as the narrator notes, "He had the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was, but as he wanted it to be" (Tharoor 52). Dhritarashtra's mimicry of British parliamentary forms reflects a postcolonial crisis where the newly independent nation adopts the colonizer's structures without fully adapting them to indigenous realities: "We took the forms of parliamentary democracy, preserved them, put them on a pedestal and paid them due obeisance. But we ignored the basic fact that parliamentary democracy can only work if those who run it are constantly responsive to the needs of the people... Neither condition was fulfilled in India for long" (Tharoor 368).

The tragic legacy of colonial policy is most starkly realized in the novel's treatment of Partition, an outcome of the British strategy of *Divide et impera* (Divide and rule). Tharoor explicitly blames the colonial administration for exacerbating and institutionalizing religious differences that India had traditionally absorbed:

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Divide et impera, they called it in the language of their own Roman conquerors - divide and rule. Stress, elevate, sanctify and exploit the differences amongst your subjects, and you can reign over them for ever - or for as near to ever as makes no difference... As soon as the national revolt... was put down, British officials rediscovered their Latin lessons. Divide et impera was the subject of closely argued policy-minutes; everything had to be done to drive wedges between Indians in the interests of the whites and Whitehall. The British did not have far to look to place their wedges: they found the perfect opportunities in the religious distinctions which India, in its tolerance, had so long and so innocently preserved. The strategy was amoral, the tactics immoral. The obvious cleavage to strike upon was between 'the Hindus' and 'the Muslims'. (Tharoor 141)

This divisive policy finds its ultimate expression in the character of Mohammed Ali Karna (representing M. A. Jinnah). Karna is a highly Westernized, pork-eating, Scotch-drinking lawyer who disdains traditional religious orthodoxy, yet he becomes the leader of the Muslim Group out of political ambition and a feeling of alienation from the Hindu-dominated Kaurava party. Karna's profound feeling of exclusion, driven by the stigma of his low birth (being the unacknowledged son of a chauffeur), propels him to demand the secession of "Karnistan" (the Hacked-Off Land). The resulting Partition is depicted not as a glorious independence, but as a traumatic dismemberment of the nation, characterized by "lines of displaced human beings leading their families and animals away from the only homes they had ever known... lines of shooting hitting wounding raping killing looting attackers ripping apart the lines of stumbling fleeing bleeding crying screaming dying refugees" (Tharoor 212).

Out of this violent birth of the new nation emerges the ultimate symbol of hybrid postcolonial identity: Draupadi Mokراسي, who allegorizes Indian Democracy (D. Mokراسي). Born on January 26, 1950 (the day the Indian Constitution was promulgated), Draupadi is the illegitimate, premature child of the blind Indian Prime Minister Dhritarashtra and the British Vicereine, Georgina Drewpad. This parentage is deeply symbolic. Indian democracy is portrayed as a hybrid offspring, conceived in the final, passionate exit of the British Raj and the idealistic but blind aspirations of the Indian leadership. Draupadi is described as bearing "the indeterminate pink-and-brown colouring of her mixed parentage, a tiny frail creature with strong lungs" (Tharoor 235). Yet, she grows into a woman whose beauty reflects the authentic "sun-ripened wheatfields of the Doab," showcasing that "ours was inevitably a darker democracy, and all the more to be cherished for the Indianness of her colouring" (Tharoor 236).

Draupadi's marriage to the five Pandava brothers such as Yudhishtir (representing political and institutional rectitude), Bhim (the army), Arjun (the press and the spirit of the people), Nakul (the administrative service), and Sahadev (the diplomatic corps) symbolizes the fragile union of the various pillars of the newly independent state. However, the novel

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does not present a utopian vision of postcolonial India. Instead, it critically examines the degradation of these democratic institutions under the authoritarian rule of Priya Duryodhani (representing Indira Gandhi and the Emergency period). Draupadi's health deteriorates synchronously with the health of the nation's democratic institutions. When political infighting and authoritarianism take hold, Draupadi suffers physical ailments: she is "diagnosed as asthmatic, her breath coming sometimes in short gasps, the dead air trapped in her bronchia struggling to expel itself", reflecting the suffocation of democratic freedoms during the "Siege" (the Emergency) (Tharoor 389).

The attempted disrobing of Draupadi in the grand assembly a direct parallel to the *Mahabharata* serves as the ultimate metaphor for the humiliation and stripping away of democratic rights in postcolonial India. Unlike the epic, where divine intervention saves Draupadi's modesty, the novel leaves her vulnerable to the machinations of corrupt politicians, highlighting Tharoor's critique that modern India cannot rely on mythological miracles to save its secular institutions.

### **Conclusion**

Post-colonial literature acts as an incisive critique of the colonial legacy and envisions the complexities of creating a sustainable future for postcolonial nations. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* masterfully utilizes the framework of the *Mahabharata* to navigate the turbulent waters of India's colonial past and postcolonial present. By dismantling the "imperial gaze" of the British colonizers, exposing the brutal economic and physical realities of the Raj, and satirizing the cultural hybridity of India's founding fathers, Tharoor creates a profound postcolonial text.

The novel underscores that the end of colonial rule does not equate to the end of the nation's struggles. The tragedy of Partition, the structural inadequacies of mimicked British parliamentary forms, and the subsequent internal erosion of democracy under authoritarian leaders demonstrate that the legacy of colonialism casts a long, dark shadow. Yet, through the resilient figure of Draupadi Mokraasi and the underlying philosophical message delivered by Ved Vyas, Tharoor suggests that India's identity is continually evolving. In rejecting absolute certitudes, the novel embraces the pluralism and diversity inherent in the postcolonial condition. As the character Yudhishtir learns at the end of his journey, "No more certitudes... Accept doubt and diversity. Let each man live by his own code of conduct... Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one dharma" (Tharoor 418). Ultimately, Tharoor's work asserts that the postcolonial project is an ongoing, eternal struggle a continuous rewriting of the nation's destiny in the face of both external legacies and internal challenges.

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