

**India as a Narrated Nation: A Postcolonial Reading of Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel***

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**Abstract**

In the novel entitled *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor offers a fresh reading of the epic *Mahabharata* in the light of political history of the recent past. This paper tries to argue that this novel is simultaneously a nationalist narrative and an attempt to subvert the dominant versions of history, politics and epics. This dimension renders the work the qualities of a historiographic metafiction. Imagining national identities in a postcolonial country with magnanimous diversity is associated with the state's use of cultural productions and academic spaces to see to it that the people develop loyalty to the shared history and future goals. This notion is suggested by Benedict Anderson in the book *Imagined Communities*, which forms the theoretical foundation for this paper.

**Keywords:** *The Great Indian Novel, Shashi Tharoor, Nationalism, Postcolonial criticism, Imagined communities.*

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In the Indian context, nationalism is a very distinct entity owing to the peculiar ways like the non-violence principle through which it attained independence. Well known academician Yael Tamir, in his work on nationalism, makes a few important remarks. "National experiences are particular and universal at the same time. But each nation encounters the universal experiences of liberation and self-determination in its own specific ways" (418). Further, proliferation and sustenance of a nation of such humongous diversity and the individual's identity is a riddle that each Indian citizen is grappling with. Tamir speaks of the role of census, maps and museums in shaping the imagining of nations (420). However, this paper tries to unveil the relationship between imagining the nation and literature.

The motivation behind this research is the contemporary debate on using or rather manipulating historical instances by various political groups. This research primarily tries to engage with Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* to analyse these concerns. From now on, this book will be referred to as *TGIN*. The relevance of choosing this area lies in the fact that the identity and thoughts of every Indian is moulded in a particular fashion and the sense of nationalism shapes the consciousness and perception of people (Tamir 430). A nuanced understanding of this issue is the key to explore the ways in which the institution of nation state functions and creates loyal subjects.

The topic of this research is the exploration of the ways in which narratives work in bringing together a country by choosing Shashi Tharoor's *TGIN* as a specimen of texts which deals with history, politics and the subversion of both. Tharoor is a prolific writer, diplomat, politician and eloquent speaker. He is the prize winning author of many fictional and nonfictional books.

A nation's existence is not stagnant and stable. National identities are unstable (Tamir 431). History and literature are some of the tools that provide the ideological apparatus for this existence. The same is the crux of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities*. Nations does not

exist really but as imagined communities because members of even the smallest nations will never know all of their fellow citizens (Anderson 6). The primary text chosen for this research is a combination of history, epic and literature and hence, an analysis of it would provide critical insights in delineating the questions of relationship between imagining the nation and literature.

The primary text for the present study is essentially a retelling of the Indian nationalist movement and first few decades after independence by satirically using the great epic *Mahabharata* as a metaphor. The reason behind choosing this text is that it provides an interesting example of constructing a sense of belongingness to the nation and at the same time, subverts the dominant versions of history and epics.

The thesis that runs through and inspired this study is to bring to light how a nation creates subject positions for its citizens. The objective of this paper is to deconstruct the notion of a nation which is often seen as a stable entity which always existed. Also, it would look into the question of how the epics and myths become pivotal in defining India and how is it used by the author to reinforce and legitimize the sense of belongingness to India.

- The primary objective of this study is to analyse *TGIN* on the basis of concepts such as narrated nations and imagined communities.
- To understand how it subverts the notions of national pride and legacy of epics in a subtle manner.

In the literature review, scholarly research articles and chapters from books are selected to contextualise the present paper. The materials are chosen keeping in mind their relevance to this study and to define the unique space of this paper in the already existing body of knowledge. The methods used in these works are qualitative ones that interrogate both the texts themselves and the discourses related to them. The methodologies largely look into the nuances of colonial rule and what followed it. For convenience, the papers has been organized on the basis of their themes.

## **The satire and parody in *TGIN***

Three authors<sup>1</sup> have researched on the primary text, focusing on its elements of parody and satire. They are useful in giving certain insights into this paper's scopes. In his article "Satire in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*", Guruprasad S. Y argues that the author uses elements like satire, pun, parody, irony, humour and comedy to come up with a postmodern text

(69). The paper looks at the narrative technique of the novel as parody, which highly restricts its scope of delving into the more serious question of nation building. According to the author, the purpose of the novel is primarily to attack systems and figures. The paper mentions in passing the exploitation by colonial rule but does not examine it closely. Other papers explore how the politics and strategies that operated in colonial historiography are subverted by the primary text.

“The cosmopolitan diasporic writers like Rushdie, Tharoor and Seth in the effort to assert their identities in the national space of India are also engaged in ‘writing back’ to the empire and imperial constructions of history through their fictions” (Thomas 8). The postmodern, postcolonial diasporic cosmopolitan writers of India employ more or less the same strategies that the colonial historiographers once used for their historical narratives (13). In essence, these researches say that Tharoor tries to ridicule the established traditions by using parody as a tool.

Though these studies attempt to bring under scrutiny the primary text and focuses on the aspect of parody and satire, they fail to answer the question of why such a project is undertaken by Tharoor and what is its relevance after two decades of publishing. The present paper tries to delve into this topic by adopting a blend of postcolonial theories.

### **The image of Gandhi in *TGIN***

Through the character of Gangaji, a satiric representation of Mahatma Gandhi, Tharoor mocks most of the acts of the father of the nation. There are two studies<sup>2</sup> which investigate this theme. Their theoretical framework is largely postmodern and analysis is based on instances from the text.

In “De/mythicizing Gandhi: Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*”, Tamoghna Chattopadhyay explores the reasons for irreverent portrayal of national figures. She argues that “If we see the time frame of Tharoor’s work, we shall find that it has been written far away from the anti-colonial, nationalistic fervour, i.e. in 1989. Secondly, he has completed a considerable part of his higher education in the West. Besides, the author had already been posted abroad in various departments and diplomatic missions of the United Nations for about eleven years when his book was published” (140). These researchers investigate how Gandhi fits into the character of Gangaji in the novel and its critical implications.

Any criticism against a figure like Gandhi has the potential of becoming a controversy. The present study tries to figure out why such an irreverent tone is used to narrate incidents and leaders of national significance. Here, Tharoor consciously tries to tell his readers that it is high

time that they detach themselves from the nostalgic souvenirs of the past, look at them from a more objective point of view and a contemporary global perspective. These ideas are elaborated in this paper.

## **Reclaiming History through Narratives**

Kanishka Chowdhury's "Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor's Great Indian Novel" uses a postcolonial lens to examine the nuances of retelling of histories and their expected outcomes. The major argument of this paper is that writers like Tharoor are caught between their own class positions and the ambivalent loyalties. Further, the novel does not call attention to itself as a political and politicized activity (43). The idea that runs through the paper is that while the novel reclaims history to a group of people, the majority who were silenced is still voiceless.

Claims along these lines are brought up by other researches also<sup>3</sup>. "Tharoor shows India's transformation from dharma to adharma and from nobility to brutality. But he fails to give measures to restore its past glory" (Samrajyalakshmi 9). Some of these researchers points out that the second half of the novel has got inherent weaknesses in terms of amalgamating with the epic and history. This might be true in the structural sense but as far as themes and motives are concerned, the endeavour strides forward. Tharoor's book is a part of postcolonial strategy to question the veracities and conventions of imperialist historiography (Yadav 4). It attempts to rewrite India's history against the coloniser's version.

Chowdhury's claim that the novel does not call attention to itself as a political text and the argument that a large number of people are out of its reach would not hold good. This paper tries to prove that the primary text is a highly politicized narrative and loaded with ideology. While it leaves a large section of the society outside its scope, it does include a considerable chunk of people and these results in shifts in thinking. These notions of national belonging and sensitivity are what operate inconspicuously in the novel. It influences and changes the ways in which people imagine their nation. Further, restoring past glory does not seem to be the author's objective. The present paper attempts to look at the more pertinent issue of what does the reading of such literary works do to people's versions of history and how they imagine their postcolonial identities.

## **Common themes and narrative techniques in Shashi Tharoor's works**

In his article "The reflection of Indianness in Shashi Tharoor's work", Bhavesh D Parmar analyses Tharoor's writings. Though the author attempts to prove that there is a distinct feature of Indianness in Tharoor's works, apart from saying that Indian culture is multifaceted, the

pertinent question why it is so remains unanswered. The author's claim that Indian English writing has become mature enough to write about our own needs and aspirations (35) does not stand because language and societies are an organic entities and along with the evolution of needs and aspirations, it is also dynamically evolving. In the past also there were prolific writings like *Anandhmadh* which reflected Indianness of that time. A number of similar studies are available<sup>4</sup>. They argues that nuances of caste and class becomes important in Tharoor's works and the major technique Tharoor uses is an intermingling of the past and the present with a tinge of current political and social issues (Kurien 234). Statements like "women who suffer the most get an exalted position later in the eyes of the society and god" appear very problematic. The argument that secularism is attainable by practicing political harmony is a common thread in Tharoor's works but this aspect is not investigated in detail by the researchers.

Shashi Tharoor uses myth and history interchangeably to decode each other, which is to be interpreted as a typical postmodern rejection of absolute truths and grand-narratives (Mukherjee 65). Bakhtinian idea of carnivalesque is used to understand the novel's implications. Tharoor's works are asserting multiple and contradicting histories in themes and narrative techniques. "*Riot*, is a novel that takes artistic liberty in parodying both the immediate and remote past of India and questioning the very premise on which the whole ideology and praxis of religious hatred is based" (Parween 58). Since the same is the case with the present research's primary text, these concepts are worth analysing. The element of fiction in Tharoor's novel is minimal because the characters are all more or less real life and the incidents that happened are also not fictional; the author only puts the characters and incidents in a different perspective and in the skin of mythical figures (Skinner 22). Further works explores the question of the purpose of using history in novels. The intertextuality within the novels of Tharoor in the context of the epic *Ramayana*, allows the reader to decode events and characters in a different trajectory.

Although the objectives of this study are far from what is handled by these researchers, they are useful in developing an understanding of the writing styles, common themes and objectives of Shashi Tharoor's writings which would lead to the more complex entanglements. Apart from the findings that the author's writing style is a fragmented one which implies multiple truths and subjectivities, his books seeks to subvert the epics, the contemporary relevance and the real life influence of these works in the construction of socio-political milieu is overlooked. This becomes the scope of the present paper.

### **Researches pertaining to relevant methodologies**

There are a number of studies that examines the merits and demerits of the theoretical frameworks used in this study<sup>5</sup>. The work "The Enigma of Nationalism" by Yael Tamir is essentially a critique of Benedict Anderson's ideas of nations as imagined communities. He

argues that it is not a practical one in many cases. An important aspect of Anderson's theory is explored in one of these works- Time, which is very often overlooked. Reorganisation of the timing of the nation is something that is applicable to the Great Indian Novel as well. Relationship between national identity and cultural production argues how the former is evolved from the latter. The importance of the reader's identification with a text's protagonists, national contents and values is very important in the construction of an imagined community (Unzueta 82). They also refutes Frederic Jameson's idea that all the third world texts are having a political dimension and they somehow represent national allegories. They use theories of Homi K Bhabha to respond to this reductionist view. Imagined communities in the Indian context, the concept of print capitalism, colonisation of imagination, and the functions of language are delineated by these researchers.

Since some of these works are primarily dealing with the practical impossibilities of the theory, it will not affect the purpose of this study. Even though this would not come under the topic of the current study, it acts as a rebuttal to the Andersonian idea of imagined communities. Many of them responds to reductive theories such as that of Frederic Jameson's. These researches contribute to a nuanced understanding of varied issues entangled with nations as cultural productions. The work on *Midnight's Children's* narration of nation bears a very close similarity to the present study and gives insights into a similar text that has almost the same impact.

### **Researches on the area of Indian English literature**

The papers coming under this section<sup>6</sup> claims that Raja Rao, like Chinua Achebe is a forerunner of postcolonial criticism. If Achebe has emphasized his African idiom to write novels in his famous work, *Novelist as Teacher*, Rao has done so admirably in his Preface to *Kanthapura*. They should be given the credit of advocating writing fiction in English with new idioms and new themes based on the stories of their own nations (Das 11). Further, it claims that Shashi Tharoor's *TGIN* based on *The Mahabharata* pales into insignificance when placed by the side of *The Serpent and the Rope* (14). They also describe the manner in which the English language took root in modern India. It does so by using gender as the unit of analysis (Chandra 199) and focuses on the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* to drive home the point of India's legacy as opposed to the coloniser's reductionist views.

While all these works give some critical insights into this paper's area of deliberation, this paper would also try to look into some more aspects. Das's argument that the Great Indian Novel would pale into insignificance while juxtaposed with Raja Rao is a problematic one. This study attempts to prove it wrong. Sen's and Chandra's ideas contribute to a comprehensive

understanding of the area of this research in general and a glimpse of the kind of ideological differences prevailing there.

The research looks at the ways in which language is used to construct the nation. The text is not only read as it is but the politics and ideology invested in the novel are investigated. Apart from analysing the text, the discourses entangled with the themes are also examined. The manner in which language is used and how it shapes one's perception of the world becomes the core issues here. The methodology used in this study is based on the after effects of colonial regimes. The theory of imagined communities proposed by Benedict Anderson which claims that the nations are imagined in the people's minds is at the base of this paper. Also, relevant aspects of Homi K. Bhabha's ideas on nation and narration are used to investigate the thesis.

The scope of the research revolves around the possibilities of seeing India and its nationalism from a different perspective. The study isolates itself from any kind of national sentiments and tries to be in an objective position. Thus, it would serve as an alternate way of looking at many social constructs. The outcomes of this research would help one understand the nuances of political goals of narratives and novels in particular. The fact that communities and nations largely exist on the basis of imagined unity and not on anything concrete would lead to form critical insights both in the academic realm and in real life. Further, interdisciplinary studies like this are imperative in the evolving academic sphere since it offers an analysis of a significant symbiotic relationship between literary works and political history.

*TGIN* by Shashi Tharoor is a text with two layers of readings, which are contrasting, yet complementary (Thomas 284). On one hand, the epic *Mahabharata* is used as a tool to create a sense of shared history, belongingness and patriotism. On the other hand, national leaders, historical incidents and heroic figures are casted in a sarcastic and critical light. This is nothing but a subversion of both the epic and the recent history of the country. The novel moves in a vicious cycle, which denotes the fact that history repeats itself. It ends where it started and the narrator is convinced that he should retell the entire story, which draws attention to the notion of varying and subjective perspectives. Flash backs and digressions makes the text nonlinear. "An intermingling of these time periods coupled with a tinge of the current political and social issues makes their novels a kind of fact cum fiction based reading" (Kurien 234). This research attempts to examine what the text does as a political project and how it encapsulates hidden undercurrents of subversion, by delineating them as follows.

### **(A) The symbiotic relationship between literature and nation**

The nation's relationship with novel or literature in general becomes a matter of concern in *Imagined Communities* (Anderson 334). Why does the nation depend on literature? There is a



need to constantly evoke the sense of nationalism to hold the country together. This concern is articulated by other theorists as well. “Nations, like narratives, lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully encounter their horizons in the mind’s eye” (Bhabha 1).

Factors like language helps in binding the nation together, with some exceptions (Anderson 47). In India, the project of attaining unity through language is not at all possible. Vernacular languages and dialects of India are most often mutually incomprehensible. In a country that is divided into states on the basis of language, the only language that facilitates communication between the Indians is English. This is where the role of epics and the notion of appropriation and subversion comes in. In the *GIN*, the author uses Indian language words copiously, and provides the reader with a glossary at the end which contains the words such as dharna and khadi which proclaims Indianness (Tharoor 421). The author is particular to communicate to his readers through the Indian words and to eliminate any possibility of losing essence. The title of the novel alludes to the glorious past of India. However, the text is written in English, the language of the coloniser. This makes it an attempt to ‘write back to the empire’.

History is another thing that is strong enough to create a sense of camaraderie among the population. But, here too, the history of the Indian subcontinent cannot be effectively used for this purpose because it is one of conflicting standpoints, conquests and wars. Moreover, it is not shared by all the people. The reverberation of conquests and wars still lingers around and takes the form of riots. Further, there is plethora of competing versions of history. This is where using the epics becomes a more feasible way of putting across the idea and reaching out to all the people. The epics are much more relatable for people irrespective of caste and religion and they have permeated into the daily lives, language and culture of the people. The *Mahabharata* is not only a Hindu text. Modern televised versions and comic forms have further popularized the ideals in the epic. Thus, ‘dharma’ becomes the defining feature of the life of any Indian (Tharoor 420). Most nationalists attempt to repress the fact that their nation is a reiteration of a worldwide phenomenon (Tamir 418). This is done by picking up things that can be projected as unique possessions of the nation. Epics in general and *Mahabharata* in particular is an example in this respect and they unflinchingly aid the nationalist project. The recent trend of using myths and legends to write fictional works in English in India is inextricably connected to this. This aspect is dealt with in detail in a subsequent section. When most other works incorporates bits and pieces of national history and political happenings, *TGIN*, much like a counter history, narrates the whole story of the evolution of nation in a satirical manner. The narration is from the point of view of V.V and he himself declares that this is his own story, rather than claiming that it is the story of the country (Tharoor 18). This is a clear indication of the subjective nature of history.

The relationship between the nation and its literature is symbiotic because they influence and nurture each other. National pride and national integration permeates into the themes and

objectives of texts. At the same time, texts that pertain to nationalist causes play a formative role in binding the nation together by constructing a sense of belongingness and national identity in the mind of its citizens. In the modern context, an individual can hardly imagine himself/herself without being part of a particular nation, rather than a country. This is because countries are tangible entities with geographical borders while nations exist in the imagination of the people, paving the way for a stronger emotional involvement.

### **(B) The state intervention in constructing and propagating select versions of history**

Literary texts are not produced from immediate circumstances. They emerge out of a complex interplay of various elements. “The concept of the nation significantly influences the production and consumption of literary texts, national identity and cultural production” (Bennet 177). If extended a little bit, this idea is applicable to history as well. The production and consumption of national history within the academic spaces has become a very contentious issue.

“Any claims about postcolonial texts must be negotiated through an intricate mapping of specific social and cultural conditions that accompany the production of a particular text” (Chowdhury 42). In India, bodies like the NCERT (National Council for Educational Research and Training) and the UGC are some instruments which regulate the academic sphere. They prescribe syllabi that are to be taught in the schools and the universities. These bodies are in turn, controlled by and made up of members of the ruling political party. Very obviously, this makes the students to focus more on certain things while certain others are omitted and overlooked. This has got a humongous effect in the construction of nation hood, history and identity.

Thus, there is a national project which is constantly trying to create subject positions for the people to occupy. The Althusserian notion of interpellation and Ideological State Apparatus operates here. This is achieved by letting only one version of thought, history to propagate. This creates identities that are founded in the same way. This is the aim of the state too. The nation state cannot sustain if its subjects are diverse to such an extent that they do not subscribe to its nationalism. Opposing views, identities are subjugated in a very clever manner. Thus, the word history itself has given way to the state-sponsored NCERT version of history and not the individual’s own particular versions and perceptions. Micro narratives fail find their place and space and contradicting voices are effectively silenced, most often in the name of patriotism. But the pivotal question to be asked is that, who determines a citizen’s nationalism should be along the lines of what is dictated by the state. Similar concerns are researched by Indian scholars as well (Chatterjee 30). In *TGIN*, the narrator V.V also admits that it is his story that follows (Tharoor 18). This is a reminder from the author to the readers that the whole novel is just a different take on the nationalist discourses and each one can have their own stories that would

contribute to the imagining of the nation. Thus, the necessity to cling on to the state's version of history is rejected out rightly.

In India, there have been numerous instances in which historians and groups of people were labelled as seditionists because they were having micro narratives that do not conform to the nationalist project. History of the parochial faces extinction and is at the verge of being wiped off. The nationalist project ensures that the students are taught the national histories and not the local ones. *The GIN* deals with this problem in a clever manner. It does both conformation and rebellion at the same time and allows the perplexed reader to ponder over the question of choosing between the dominant national discourses that is apparent in the novel through equating the political history with the epic (Skinner 12) and the less conspicuous motive of subverting both the epic and political history through irreverent treatment.

For the state to exist and function well there should be a nation in place. This is where narratives come into the picture. Some histories are the legitimized national histories, while some others are rejected as invalid. The truth is, the official version too will certainly crumble down if it is not constantly reinforced through academic spaces and literary and cultural productions like films, novels etc. It is also to be noted that opposing views of history also can be legitimised in the similar way if one uses popular media, institutional spaces and cultural products strategically.

### **(C) Subversion of the dominant narratives**

*The GIN* is a novel that can be read in various capacities. At the surface level, it is only a satirical representation of political struggles like the independence struggle, the emergency period and the related turbulent political climate. But, the question of portraying the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi in irreverent tone remains unanswered. In his analysis of *Midnight's Children*, Robert Bennet points out that the novel is a national allegory at the surface, but there are instances of subversion within it (Bennet 188). The story rushes from Amritsar 1919 to Agra 1942, deliberately avoiding the traditionally followed centre of happenings. It also purposely gets the date of assassination of Gandhi wrong. Parallels can be drawn from this text to the present primary text in terms of the Bakhtinian idea of polyphonic narrative because both of them give space for conflicting views. The novel is nonlinear narrative though the story is narrated by a single person due to the flash backs and digressions it brings in (Thomas 281). Tharoor satirically examines incidents that are generally overlooked and concealed. *TGIN* is critical of and tries to mock Gandhi and other prominent leaders and many of their deeds. This is a subversion of both the epic and the dominant version of political history.

Shagufta Parween, in his work, quotes Linda Hutcheon's words about historiographic metafiction (56). A work that attempts to subvert a convention by acting within it is termed as a historiographic metafiction. *TGIN*, in reality, takes one step forward from this notion because, it is not only subverting a single dominant discourse, but two simultaneously. The political discourse in India in the second half of twentieth century and the grand narrative are subverted by the author in *TGIN*. The novel is divided into eighteen books, which resembles the *Mahabharata*. Further, the titles of each of these sections are a parody of certain books and historical events. For example, the eighth book is titled 'Midnight's Parents'. This is a clear reference to Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children* (Tharoor 149). Tharoor also subverts the title of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* in naming the sixteenth chapter of the novel as 'The Bungle Book- Or the Reign of Error'. This can be read in relation to the fact that Kipling and his works are widely known as imperialist.

To hold together a country with such magnanimous diversity in all ways possible, narratives are essential and literature and other cultural productions binds the people together. India as a nation does not exist by itself. It is a result of so many discursive practices (Unzueta 75). Leaders like Nehru and Gandhi are criticised for their faulty actions (Parmer 36). This is a very daring attempt because in all possibility, the writer is well aware of the possible controversies that would have been erupted by his novel. It is undisputed that the character of Gangaji in the novel is a caricature of Mahatma Gandhi (Chattopadhyay 146). Such a treatment urges the reader to stop deifying national leaders and thinking of them as flawless people. This also brings in a certain amount of objectivity in the way in which one imagines national identity, rather than paving the way for jingoism. "The use of paradoxical situations in The Great Indian Novel, mystify the components of myth and history. This obfuscation of the real meaning is due to the postmodern denial of absolutes, for an interpretation of a text" (Mukherjee 65).

"Reader identification with a text's protagonists, its national contents and values is crucial to the construction of an imagined community" (Unzueta 82). In order to achieve this identification, something that is common to all people across the divides of caste, class, language and race has to be invented. This is the space where myths, legends and epics occupy. If there exists anything that applies to all Indians, it is the epics. This is what prompts Tharoor to use the epic as vehicle of his ideas. However, he does not want to emphasise the epic as a grand narrative in the course of satirising and hence, makes his work a historiographic metafiction, which subverts the epic also, using the epic itself.

#### **(D) The outcomes of retelling myths and epics**

The contemporary trend in Indian literatures to reconstruct and retell the epics and legends is important in developing a comprehensive understanding of the matters under scrutiny. Amish Tripadi, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni are some writers who have ventured into this in English while they also have vernacular counterparts like M T Vasudevan Nair. These projects are to be seen in juxtaposition with the tussle between individual identity and collective identity and grand narratives and micro narratives. They explore the silences, voids and tries to come up with fresh readings. There is an act of imparting agency to the voiceless in most of these renditions. Subverting the dominant discourse lies in the crux of all these projects. These works are widely read and are gaining attention in the academic platforms. They, as powerful tools that influence the imaginations of the people, demands close examination. “The formative role of the novel genre in the emergence and consolidation of modern nation states has become nearly axiomatic in the field of literary studies” (Vermeulen 2). The same idea is elaborated by Homi K Bhabha too (Bhabha 3).

Indian authors have engaged themselves in a retelling of the standard versions of history by both experimenting with the narrative technique and a portrayal of multiple points of view that both decenters any authoritative form of knowledge and hints at the possibility of multiple truths. (Parween 56)

Works like these does another function as well. They fight against the homogenisation of cultural products. The western literary critics often tries to ignore the cultural and political diversity of the postcolonial writings and perceives them only as a resistance to the western cultural hegemony (Chowdhury 41). These retellings assert the legacy of the postcolonial nation along with providing contrasting viewpoints as opposed to the dominant perspective.

### **(E) Projecting India in front of a global readership**

When Shashi Tharoor writes a book, its readership is not only India, but a global audience. This leads to flattening of contours, reductionist and essentialist views, which surfaces in the novel as well. In his work, Frederick Jameson proposes a very reductionist theory to look at the literary productions of the third world. According to him, irrespective of the diversities and variations, the novels produced by the third world revolve around national allegories (Bensmaia 151).

“All nations see themselves as having some distinct features” (Anderson 7). This is the basis of patriotism. The idea that runs throughout *TGIN* and in the veins of the people of India is ‘Dharma’. Tharoor explains this concept at length and devotes the book’s last page as a note. It is nothing other than a deliberate attempt to project India before the western readers as the epicenter of dharma and simultaneously reminding the Indian reader what his/her legacy is.

For the people of India, the novel does something else. Tharoor wants his readers to take unbiased positions in analysing the nation and its nuances. Unlike texts like *Anandmath* which treats the idea of nation as superior to even religion, Tharoor is way more realistic in his approach. The flaws in the coloniser and the colonised are weighted equally in the *GIN*. The narrator V.V is portrayed as a typical old politician in India who is cantankerous and too old to get hold of a party ticket to contest elections (Tharoor 1). At the same time, the British is ridiculed for their pretence. This is evident in the line “let me take your glasses off your face before I punch you in the nose” (77). He out rightly rejects the coloniser saying "Some of our more Manichean historians tend to depict the British villains as supremely accomplished - the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent manipulators of the destiny of India. Stuff and nonsense, of course" (116).

However, it is true to a certain extent that Tharoor is caught in a position where he is unable to represent the voiceless people (Chowdhury 44). This is because of two reasons. First, even if tried deliberately, writing a book that is inclusive of all sections is humanly impossible considering the diversity of people and the sheer volume. Second, Tharoor writes keeping in mind his readers and publishers across the globe and this significantly influences the kind of engagement.

Definitely conscious of a world audience that would primarily translate into a western audience, Tharoor inadvertently uses an interesting tone of mockery and mythmaking, thus satiating the audience’s urge for the exotic and recreating a postmodern retelling of a mythical past of his nation. (Panda & Mohanty 163)

In the past, the themes and objectives of writers like that of the ‘big trio’ of Anand, Rao and Narayan were of a particular kind (Das 14). Writers like Tharoor depart a great deal from the objectives and styles of these writers. They are not very keen to preserve the customs and traditions and preserve, project them to the western world. On the contrary, their objective is to come up with a revisionist history.

To sum up, the ways in which India functions as an imagined community is thus, a set of complex processes that operates inconspicuously. *TGIN* is a nationalist narrative and at the same time, an attempt to subvert the dominant versions of history, politics and epics. This makes it a historiographic metafiction. Imagining national identities in a postcolonial country with magnanimous diversity is associated with the state using cultural productions and academic spaces to see to it that the people develop loyalty to the shared history and future goals. Unlike the western critic’s prejudiced opinion, literary productions of the postcolonial nations and the third world are not only anti-imperial. That is a reductive misconception which erases the

heterogeneity of the literatures and an attempt to over emphasis the after effects of colonial regime.

It has become fashionable to take up myths, legends and epics and recast them in a different time frame. This act of writing new versions of grand narratives reinforces the national heritage in the people and reminds them of a glorious past, which subtly implies that it has to be continued in the future. Thus, imagining nations which does not really exist anywhere is an inevitable thing in the modern world. At the same time, unlike other defining features of a human being like gender and sex, it is a highly unstable affair. Since the political and economic systems of the modern world are founded on nationalism, it becomes imperative to propagate it.

The major limitation for this research would be the lack of adequate time to investigate all the entangled issues. Also, the requirement of being concise within twenty five pages restricts the kind of engagement possible. Since the study is a working paper, it functions mainly as a pilot project.

A more comprehensive study that brings under scrutiny the political nature and implications of other relevant texts can be undertaken for further research. Also, theoretical perspectives like Edward Said's Orientalism and Homi K. Bhabha's ideas on 'dissemiNation' can be used to analyse the texts. The dependency of nationalism on cultural production operates in a very inconspicuous manner. This can be explored in many other texts.

## End Notes

1. Leslee Thomas's *Parody and Politics in Post-Colonial Fiction: The Indian Experience* and Dr. Punyasree Panda and Sulagna Mohanty's *The Parody of the Sacred: A Study of the Characters in the Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor*.
2. *Mahatma Gandhi and the Great Indian Novel* by Dr. S.D. Sargar.
3. In *Social and Political Ideology in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel* by Dr. B. Samrajya Lakshmi, *Colonial Historiography Vs Postcolonial Historiography: History, Myth and Allegory in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel*, by Ram Bhawan Yadav and Ramlal Agarwal's review of the novel.
4. *Socio political themes in Shashi Tharoor's Riot and Amitav Ghosh's River of smoke*, by Klinsa Kurien, *Myth and History = Mystery? – A Paradoxical Breach Of Canon In The Novels Of Shashi Tharoor* by Baidehi Mukherjee, *Rethinking History: A Study of Shashi*

*Tharoor's Riot As a Postmodern Historiographic Metafiction*, by Shagufta Parween, *History-Fiction Interface in Indian English Novel: Mulk Raj Anand, Nayantara Sahgal, Salman Rushdie, Shashi Tharoor, O.V. Vijayan* by T.N. Dhar, *Riot: A Novel; A Postmodern Narrative* by Dr. Diksha Sharma.

5. *The Enigma of Nationalism* by Yael Tamir, Peter Vermeulen's *The Case of David Grossman's See Under: Love*, Robert Bennet's *National Allegory or carnivalesque Heteroglossia? Midnight's Children's Narration of Indian National Identity*, Fernando

Unzueta's *Novel Subjects: On Reading and National (subject) Formations*, Reda Bensmaia's *Postcolonial Nations: Political or Poetic Allegories*, Partha Chatterjee's *Whose Imagined Community?*

6. *Remembering the founding fathers of Indian English Fiction* by Bijay Kumar Das, *Mimicry, Masculinity, and the Mystique of Indian English: Western India, 1870–1900* by Shefali Chandra, *The Argumentative Indian: Writings on Indian History, Culture and Identity* by Amartya Sen.

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