



**HYBRIDITY AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATION IN SHASHI THAROOR'S
WORKS *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL* AND *AN ERA OF DARKNESS: THE
BRITISH EMPIRE IN INDIA***

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Abstract

*In the present age, hybridity and cultural negotiation enable flexible identities, resist cultural domination, empower marginalized voices and create new cultural forms by blending tradition with modernity. The study refines postcolonial theory by exploring how hybridity and cultural negotiation operate in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016). It analyses how these two works engage with diverse paradigms of hybridity drawing upon Homi K Bhabha's hybridity and mimicry, Said's concept of colonial orientalism and Spivak's concept of the subaltern voice. *The Great Indian Novel* reinterprets the Mahabharata as a political allegory of India's liberation struggle, reflecting a literary form that hybridizes epic tradition with modern politics. This hybrid narrative illustrates how myth can be sublimated into a postcolonial framework to resist and assert identity. In contrast, *An Era of Darkness* employs empirical history and Western scholarly reasoning to expose the predatory nature of the British Empire, subverting imperial logics from within its own epistemology. Despite their differing genres and subject matters, both works share the common postcolonial goal of transforming mimicry into mastery and negotiating power dynamics. Tharoor's adept use of English, rich with irony, parody, and rhetorical finesse, demonstrates how colonized subjects might appropriate the colonizer's language for self-reflection and reconstruction. The study supports that Tharoor's portrayal of hybridity is not one of passive acceptance but rather a dynamic process of cognitive and moral recovery, wherein India's postcolonial identity embodies a fluid hybridization of tradition and modernity.*

Keywords

Hybridity, Postcolonial, Orientalism, Mimicry, Subaltern voices, Negotiation, etc.

Full Article

Introduction:

The literary and intellectual works of Shashi Tharoor have an outsized relevance to the postcolonial discourse of present-day India. His writings, particularly *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) and *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016), offer rich ground for exploring history, culture, identity, and postcolonial thought. As an author of novels ranging from fiction to historical narratives, Tharoor embodies the duality of a humanist post colonialist, positioned between East and West, educated in Western academia yet deeply connected to Indian civilizational ethics. His dual identity, as both an heir to colonial legacies and a critic of imperial ideology, enables him to navigate acts of cultural diplomacy.



By integrating myth, irony, and historiography, Tharoor's works exemplify what Homi K. Bhabha describes as the "in-between" space of hybridity, a realm where colonization is both replicated and reversed, allowing the colonized subject to redefine identity in the context of imperial power. As articulated by thinkers such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Homi Bhabha, postcolonial theory serves as a vital tool for examining how domination and representation were shaped during colonial times.

In *Orientalism* (1978), Said demonstrates how colonial discourse framed the East as inferior and passive, setting it in opposition to the rational and active West. This ideological process of "othering" provided moral justification for imperial domination. Spivak, in her essay *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988), further critiques this by revealing the systemic silencing of marginalized voices, including women, peasants, and indigenous peoples, under colonial and patriarchal power. Bhabha, in *The Location of Culture* (1994), adds a crucial dimension to postcolonial thought by theorizing hybridity as a site of resistance and redefinition. Hybridity, according to Bhabha, is defined by the ambivalence present in colonial experiences where colonial authority is both replicated and interrupted, enabling space for new identities to form. Hybridity in postcolonial India manifests at the intersection of language and culture, history and postcolonial consciousness, taking place on a larger scale. English, the colonizer's tongue, has been appropriated by Indian writers as a force for oppression and a mode of self-expression. The irony, verbosity, and Indianized English of Tharoor's linguistic style reflect this duality.

In Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, he rewrites the Western novel form inside an Indian structure, offering a different experience with the Mahabharata as an allegory for the Indian freedom struggle and post-independence politics. This act of creative appropriation signifies more than mere literary innovation; it represents a new cultural agency reclaimed through hybridity. Similarly, in *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor employs the English language and the conventions of Western historical narrative to dismantle the myth of British imperialism. By wielding the colonizer's tools of knowledge against him, Tharoor engages in what Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin refer to in *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) as the postcolonial writer's tactic of "abrogation and appropriation". Here, colonial language transcends its connotation of subjugation and oppression, transforming into a medium of critique and liberation.

Hybridity in Tharoor's works extends beyond linguistic and formal experimentation; it encompasses cultural negotiation. The colonial legacy in India has instilled a profound cultural ambivalence, as Tharoor's characters often oscillate between reverence for Western modernity and nostalgia for indigenous traditions. Rather than being a sign of weakness, this ambivalence becomes a productive force in his narratives. It aligns with Bhabha's concept of "the third space," where fixed identities dissolve, allowing new hybrid forms of belonging to emerge. Tharoor's protagonists, metaphors, and arguments inhabit this third space, continually reinterpreting Indianness in relation to the West.

Moreover, Tharoor's historical engagement embodies what Dipesh Chakrabarty describes as the project of "provincializing Europe." In *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor critiques the Eurocentric narrative of imperialism as a civilizing mission, meticulously detailing the economic devastation inflicted by British rule, the destruction of native industries, and the extensive psychological scars left behind. However, Tharoor's approach transcends mere denunciation; his command of English rhetoric and parliamentary wit reflects a deliberate act of cultural negotiation that grapples with Western intellectual frameworks while asserting an independent Indian perspective.



In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor merges the sacred epic with the secular political legacy of modern India, collapsing temporal, cultural, and ideological boundaries. The recontextualization of figures such as Gandhi, Nehru, and Indira Gandhi signifies India's hybrid identity, where myth and modernity converge. The novel's playful intertextuality and parody embody Bhabha's assertion of "the production of hybrid identities," through which cultural symbols are recontextualized to subvert their colonial meanings. Tharoor's India is neither a pristine precolonial essence nor a mere Western imitation; it is a complex synthesis that continually evolves through negotiation and reinterpretation.

Hybridity thus becomes essential for understanding Tharoor's postcolonial vision. His works do not seek to portray India as a victimized entity; rather, they depict it as a civilization capable of absorbing, transforming, and redefining foreign influences. Tharoor's narratives celebrate India's pluralism and its capacity to embrace diversity while retaining its unique identity. This perspective aligns with postcolonial thought, which posits that identity is mutable, shaped by the interplay of history, culture, and power. Through the hybrid model, Tharoor reclaims the fractured colonial subject, transforming it into a confident postcolonial self that engages as a globalizing force, rather than one that has repressed its indigenous past.

Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*:

Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) stands as one of the most ambitious literary endeavours in Indian English fiction, intertwining the mythic structure of the *Mahabharata* with the political dynamics of 20th-century India. It serves as a parody, satire, and rewriting of epic history. Tharoor's creative experimentation exemplifies the postcolonial practice of hybridization, a central tenet in Homi K. Bhabha's theoretical framework. The novel constructs a "third space" in which the literary form of the English novel, as a product of the colonizer, is indigenized through the infusion of Indian myth, idiom, and cultural sensibility. Tharoor adeptly navigates this hybrid literary structure, reconciling Western and Indian epistemologies to deliver a narrative that critiques and redefines India's colonial and postcolonial identity.

That's the very title; the novel *The Great Indian Novel* is a calculated repurposing of both *The Mahabharata* and the Western model for the "Great American Novel." This linguistic and conceptual mixing embodies Tharoor's approach to cultural contestation. The act of reimagining the *Mahabharata* in English converts the epic of sacred Sanskrit into a postcolonial text of political allegory. In doing so, Tharoor does not only overcome the divide between the mythic past and that of the political current but also performs what Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin described as "writing back to the centre," (Ashcroft, *TEWB*, 6). The "centre," which is appropriated and, as such, is thus represented by British colonial culture and its linguistic hegemony, reassembled by Tharoor's Indianized narrative voice. The *Mahabharata*, emblematic of India's civilizational memory forms a medium through which Tharoor reinterprets colonial and postcolonial politics, asserting cultural self-determination in the language of the former oppressor.

Homi Bhabha's notion of mimicry lends itself to a useful lens by which to read Tharoor's stylistic choices. In colonial discourse, mimicry signifies the colonized subject's imitation of the colonizer's mannerisms, language and institutions, a mimicry that is "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 86). Tharoor, in *The Great Indian Novel*, mimics the Western novel form until it is subverted from the inside. The novel's polyphonic tone, its parodic tone and its intertextual playfulness destabilize the seriousness and linearity in the Western realist tradition. In Tharoor's hand, the English language is not a symbol of oppression but a weapon of irony. Tharoor satirizes this by using imitation, and thus undermines the use of the authority of colonial discourse, exposing its absurdities and contradictions. His hybrid narrative becomes yet another



site where the colonizer's form is appropriated and redeployed to express a worldview of Indian identity.

Particularly dramatic embodiment of hybridity comes in Tharoor's version of the *Mahabharata's* protagonists as metaphors for contemporary Indian politicians and leaders. The transformation of Ved Vyasa into "Ved Vyas" or "V.V.," when the novel's narrator becomes the character, signifies the integration of the old-fashioned storytelling with contemporary historiography. Similarly, Gangaji, an updated version of Mahatma Gandhi is a hybrid of spiritual idealism and political pragmatism. Gangaji's doctrine of non-violence based on Hindu philosophy and Western liberalism and, in its own form, represents India's cultural mediation between indigenous cultures (incl., the Mahatma) and colonial modernity. The narrative framework of the epic is used by Tharoor in a way that recontextualizes figures like Nehru (Dhritarashtra) and Jinnah (Karna) and Indira Gandhi (Priya Duryodhani), hybridizing mythical archetypes into historical figures. This convergence dissolves the binary of myth and history and implies that India's modern political persona cannot be separated from its ancient cultural consciousness.

The Great Indian Novel's structure parallels the palimpsestic structure of postcolonial identity. Each chapter layers modern history over mythic narrative, resulting in multiple layers of meaning. Because Tharoor chose to organize the novel episodically and digressively, the Indian writing approach, as it works differently than the Western (i.e. *The Mahabharata*) which features a straightforward narrative, novels represent an act of formal opposition. Such narrative hybridity changes the novel into the dialogic text in Bakhtinian terms a site of multiple voices, perspectives, and temporalities. In this sense, Tharoor's works enact what Bhabha terms "the interstitial passage between fixed identifications" (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 4). The reader is swept up and transported back and forth between the mythological and the political, the colonial and the postcolonial, the sacred and the satirical all existing in the same textual space.

Language is a primary medium of hybridity in Tharoor's novel. His English is stuffed with Indian idioms, proverbs, and rhythms, and so on, making what Salman Rushdie refers to as "chutnified English." This linguistic approach represents what Bill Ashcroft terms "abrogation" and "appropriation," as a rejection of the colonizer's language standards and the imposition of English onto local realities (Ashcroft, *TEWB*, 38–40). Tharoor's sentences tend to duplicate Indian speech patterns, and have much repetition and circular reasoning, and idiomatic humour, showing the Indianization of English as a practice of cultural assertion. His narrator's voice, for instance, vacillates between irony and reverence, ironic as well as earnest articulation of the ambivalent hybridity of the postcolonial context. This linguistic negotiation not only counters the homogenizing trend of global English but also celebrates India's multi-lingual history. Intertextual use of the *Mahabharata* in Tharoor also becomes a means of decolonizing history.

By re-contextualizing India's political saga in mythic terms, he also reclaims narrative authority from colonial historiography, which had long dismissed indigenous traditions as irrational or unscientific. Imperial narratives, as Said concludes in *Culture and Imperialism*, aimed to dominate colonized peoples by controlling their stories (xiii). Tharoor then inverts this path: he narrates India's own socio-historical viewpoint from its own cultural point of view, thereby restoring subjectivity to a nation that had been textually constructed as the "Other". *The Mahabharata's* timelessness enables Tharoor to present Indian politics as a cyclical and persistent cultural continuity, in contrast to the linear progress narrative of Western modernity. The outcome was, therefore, a hybrid historiography totally epic and modern, mythic and political, that captures India's plural identity.

The Great Indian Novel also mocks both colonial and postcolonial power structures which indicate that the hybridity of India's identity is also intrinsically and internally contradicted. Tharoor's satire of post-independence rulers reinforces how the elite Indian post freedom, the



political class frequently adopted colonial values by way of internalization. The figure of Priya Duryodhani (a remake of Indira Gandhi) embodies this irony: for while she is one who symbolizes indigenous leadership her authoritarian tendencies mirror the imperial rulers India had overthrown. Tharoor expands on Bhabha's theory of hybridity into the political field in this sense world, showing how the ideologies of the colonizer survive within the postcolonial state. The novel's satirical treatment of corruption, bureaucracy and power manifests this, through what Frantz Fanon identifies as the "pitfalls of national consciousness" (Fanon, *TWOFE*, 148), where postcolonial nations risk reproducing colonial hierarchies in a new fashion.

Parody in Tharoor's novel serves as a strategy of cultural negotiation. Parody, as Linda Hutcheon describes it, is "repetition with critical distance" (Hutcheon, *ATOP*, 26); it permits the writer to grapple with cultural structures even as questioning them. Tharoor's critique of the *Mahabharata* is not disrespectful but dialogical invites readers to re-examine tradition in a postcolonial age. By rewriting the epic as political allegory; Tharoor argues the myth itself is not set but flexible, able to express up-to-date fears and anxieties. The novel thus does hybridity not only at the level of linguistics and structure but also of the ideological, where traditional and modern values are continually reworked.

A further important element in the hybridity of *The Great Indian Novel* is its temporal blending. Tharoor collapses the divide between the past and present, mythic time and historical time. This temporal hybridity subverts the colonial understanding of linear progress. that placed the West as modern and the East as primitive. Instead, Tharoor's cyclical temporality argues that India's cultural history still vibrantly resonates with its political present. The temporal negotiation here echoes Bhabha's notion of "time-lag," the severance of colonial temporality and postcolonial experience, creating space for new cultural articulations (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 236). Tharoor's novel crystallizes this temporal hybridity by demonstrating that the postcolonial subject lives at once in multiple temporalities, a legacy of old and new alike.

Indeed, *The Great Indian Novel* celebrates hybridity as both a form of survival and creativity. It denies the binaries of East and West, tradition and modernity, colonizer and colonized. Instead, it reasserts India's ability to integrate a number of influences but not lose its distinct identity. Tharoor's tale, thick with humour and historical clarity, frames hybridity not as a harbinger of dilution but as intrinsic to Indian civilization. Through mythic and through parody and linguistic innovation, Tharoor constructs a vision of India as a plural, dialogic, and ever-evolving being an embodiment of what Bhabha calls "the performative character of cultural identity" (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 3). In this way, *The Great Indian Novel* itself is a paradigmatic postcolonial text: one that asserts narrative sovereignty through a transformation of the colonizer's forms into tools of self-expression.

Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation in *An Era of Darkness*:

While *The Great Indian Novel* represents hybridity through literary imagination, *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016) proves just as much through intellectual and historical discourse. Although the fictional and allegorical framework of the former, *An Era of Darkness* presents itself as a carefully developed historical text designed for subverting the moral and economic justification for British colonialism. Yet, beneath its non-fictional surface lies a hybrid resistance that adopts—as a necessary facade—the colonizer's lexicon, reasoning, and academic methodologies to expose the empire's inherent violence and hypocrisy. Such a hybrid is more than about the narrative, however! In form and content, *An Era of Darkness* plays between the Western modes of historical thinking coupled with the Indian experience of colonization, illustrating hybridity not as a passive blend but one of an active combat with discursive power.



Tharoor's rhetorical position in *An Era of Darkness* is a prime example of what Homi K. Bhabha (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 113) terms "the negotiation of authority" Speaking in English, using British parliamentary wit, and quoting Western historians like Angus Maddison and Adam Smith, Tharoor takes over the colonizer's epistemic space. Yet, he does so not as a submissive inheritor of colonial narratives of discourse but as its subversive interlocutor. By mastering the conventions of Western scholarship, he reestablishes intellectual agency upon the formerly colonized subject. His participation in both academic and popular debates about the right rejection of the imperial use of the imperial language as a weapon in its critique of the British Empire is appreciable. This is the quintessential example of what Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin refer to as "appropriation": the reconfiguration of imperial discourses to render a counter-imperial vision (Ashcroft, *TEWB*, 39). So Tharoor's eloquence is double-edged it echoes the hybrid it is inheritor of colonial education but reframes it in the service of postcolonial emancipation.

Thematically, *An Era of Darkness* updates and upends the Orientalist tales that used to mark India for the British Empire. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) showed how the West saw the East as an aspect of backwardness, mysticism, and passivity to justify colonial domination. Tharoor methodically dismantles this ideological skeleton by realizing India's economic and cultural sophistication before British rule. He points to data that shows that India contributed nearly 23 percent of the world's GDP before colonization a statistic that lays waste to the myth of Western "developmental" superiority. This rewriting of history from the colonized's perspective exemplifies what Said terms the "effort to narrate the silenced history of the colonized" (Said, *CAI*, 216). In disputing the colonial assertion that the British provided progress, Tharoor reimagines historical scholarship as a postcolonial weapon of resistance.

Moreover, *An Era of Darkness* also demonstrates hybridity at work in its own narrative voice. Tharoor veers between institutional indifference and moral indignation, from statistical exactitude and literary flair. This cycle encapsulates the hybridism of the postcolonial intellectual rational and passionate, global and grounded. His use in his employment of irony, sarcasm and the highly developed English rhetorical tradition of humour, becomes a kind of mimicry that undermines imperial arrogance. In that sense, Tharoor enacts the same strategy Bhabha attributes to colonial mimicry: the colonized subject appropriates the colonizer's mannerisms "almost the same, but not quite" (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 86). The difference that "not quite" is where resistance lives. Tharoor's eloquence, sharpened by the very institutions created by the British, refuses to return to them, revealing the ethical emptiness of the empire they presented as a civilizing force.

Beyond its vernacular hybridities, *An Era of Darkness* also takes cultural ideological negotiation. It doesn't romanticize pre-colonial Tharoor's argument India as a utopia just a sprawling civilization interrupted by imperialism. Here recognizes the internal hierarchies and contradictions in Indian society like the way caste and gender inequality under the claim that these were for India to reform from within, not through colonial imposition. This nuanced view evades the binary of seeing colonialism as wholly destructive or accidentally helpful. Instead, Tharoor articulates a nuanced position exemplifying what Bhabha describes as "the beyond" (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 1), a space that discloses oppositional categories and lends new forms of articulation of identity (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 1). Tharoor envisions an India capable of learning from this space of negotiation within itself, history without a sense of colonial guilt running its course.

Moreover, Tharoor's historical reconstruction resonates with Gayatri Spivak's preoccupation with the subaltern voice. Colonial archives, awash in British narratives, made the Indian subject mute, objectifying the colonized as objects of study. In *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor reverses this dynamic by centring the Indian experience around the story of empire. The Indian worker, peasant, artisan and intellectual figures scrubbed from imperial historiography are restored as agents of history. Tharoor makes it so through the recuperation of the work. Spivak's



“strategic essentialism,” a provisional consolidation of the varied experience of the colonized to fight back against imperial hegemony. His work is, therefore, not just as historical correction but ethical restoration as a reaffirmation of the humanity and the human dignity of colonized people in the moral geography of world history.

Hybridity in *An Era of Darkness* emerges, too, in Tharoor’s relationship with modernity. The text disputes the colonial story of modernity as a gift given by empire, but doesn’t dismiss the need for modernization at all. Instead, Tharoor differentiates modernity as universal through the process of social evolution and colonial modernity as a tool of coercive control. His vision is akin to Dipesh Chakrabarty’s call to “provincialize Europe,” to understand that modernity need not really be European and can emerge across different cultural pathways (Chakrabarty, *PE*, 16). By reinterpreting from an Indian perspective, Enlightenment values such as liberty, equality, and reason can be transformed into a postcolonial principle of self-definition, Tharoor transforms them into postcolonial self-definition rather than colonial force or colonial imposition. This intellectual negotiation is hybridity at the philosophical level: the simultaneous existence of Western rationality and Indian humanism in context of common critique.

What makes Tharoor’s approach unique is his rejection of cultural victimhood. Whereas many postcolonial writers focus on the trauma of colonization, Tharoor stresses resilience and continuity in his speech and in the text itself, wedging outrage with irony, outrage with wit. This rhetorical hybridity highlights the Indian skill in standing with the colonizer, in terms equal to the colonizer. It also challenges the paternalistic premise that English education only made mimic men. Instead, as Tharoor’s own career shows, it birthed articulate interlocutors who could ask questions of the empire from within its own grammar and cultural logic. In this respect, *An Era of Darkness* embodies the final products of the hybridity that *The Great Indian Novel* dramatized mimicry into mastery through fiction.

Reading *The Great Indian Novel* and *An Era of Darkness* together discloses an evolution of Tharoor’s postcolonial project from mythic allegory to historical argument. Both works negotiate with each other across cultures India’s past and present tradition and modernity, East and West. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor reimagines myth as a mode of political critique, demonstrating how the epic imagination accommodates contemporary fears. In *An Era of Darkness*, he uses empirical reasoning to reveal the economic and moral exploitation disguised by colonial discourse. While the two texts follow different forms, they are linked by a collective belief: that India’s identity is an intrinsic hybrid neither derivative of the West nor a fossilized artifact of the past, but a living alloy forged in negotiation.

Theoretically, both texts confirm Bhabha’s claim that hybridity “unsettles the mimetic or narcissistic demands of colonial power” (Bhabha, *TLOC*, 112). Tharoor’s hybrid language and genre subverts the fixity of colonial categories. Whereas his irony turns mimicry into mockery, his parody turns reverence into critique, and his historical scholarship turns imperial logic on itself. In this way Tharoor’s works demonstrate the “performative character of postcolonial identity,” routinely performed through dialogue, resistance, and redefinition. As Bill Ashcroft and collaborators note, postcolonial writing does not resist colonial inheritance; however it redirects it and renders the colonizer’s tools for new purposes (Ashcroft, *TEWB*, 38). Tharoor’s fiction and non-fiction both accomplish this shift with astonishing intellectual agility.

Conclusion:

To sum up, the former two, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* and *An Era of Darkness* together highlight the ways hybridity and cultural negotiation constitute the bases for India’s postcolonial consciousness. By the conflation of myth and modernity, irony and scholarship, Tharoor shows how the legacy of colonialism can be countered not by rejecting hybridity but by



embracing and redefining it. His use of the English language, rather than signalling submission, becomes a space of empowerment a reflection of India's capability to integrate foreign influences without losing its essence. In the mythological allegory of *The Great Indian Novel* and the factual rigor of *An Era of Darkness*, Tharoor's voice is seen to function as both Indian and global, old and new, critical and creative. His works embody Bhabha's idea of hybridity as a space of possibility; that there are new meanings to be derived from where culture meets history in the colonized subject's life - as a space where history becomes a matter for negotiation. Finally, Tharoor's writings confirm that being postcolonial itself requires ongoing negotiation. By combining the threads of epic and the empirical, literary and political, he rebuilds India's narrative in its own terms, inside its own idiom. In so doing, he takes back the story from British colonial discourse and also broadens even the boundaries of postcolonial thought itself proving that hybridity, is not actually a residuality of colonization, constitutes the dynamic centre of India's cultural selfhood in the contemporary world.

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Article Received:26/02/2026

Article Accepted:07/03/2026

Published Online:30/03/2026

To Cite the Article: *Queen, J. and Devi, R.* "Hybridity and Cultural Negotiation in Shashi Tharoor's Works *The Great Indian Novel* and *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*." *Literary Cognizance: An International Refereed/Peer Reviewed e-Journal of English Language, Literature and Criticism*, Vol.-VI, Issue-4, March, 2026, 231-238. www.literarycognizance.com

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