



40

**REWRITING THE NATION WITH DELIGHT: SATIRE AND  
POSTCOLONIAL MEMORY IN SHASHI THAROOR'S  
*THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL***

*Dr. Sandeep Palve*

*Lecturer in English,*

*Government Polytechnic, Pune,*

*Dist. Pune. MS, India*

\*\*\*\*\*

**Abstract:**

*In The Great Indian Novel (1989), Shashi Tharoor remakes the Indian freedom struggle and post Independence politics with a comic re-telling of Mahabharata, to challenge the official version of history and the national myths. This paper evaluates satire as one of the key themes in the fiction of Tharoor with a special interest in the way The Great Indian Novel reflects the horror of colonialism, the failures of Indian democracy, and the entrenchment of superiority in postcolonial India. Basing on postcolonial, historiographic metafictional approaches, the paper employs the analysis of the text, the major episodes, and characters of the novel Gangaji, Dhritarashtra, and Priya Duryodhani as political metafictional archetypes of their living counterparts that ridicule real historical figures. Critics observe that Tharoor integrates satire, allegory, metafiction, intertextuality to expose what he sees as the natural instability of history, and to deconstruct official discourse of nationalism. Through the analysis of the chosen passages, this paper will contend that, satire in The Great Indian Novel does not serve purposes of pure ridicule but rather serves to reflect on nation, memory, power in postcolonial India as a critical way of thinking.*

**Keywords:** *Satire, Postcolonial Fiction, Historiographic Metafiction, National Memory, etc.*

**Introduction:**

Blending high literary playfulness with incisive political critique, Shashi Tharoor fiction has taken a unique niche in the current Indian writing in English. The Great Indian Novel is one of his works which could be discussed as a long-term experiment of rewriting the Indian nation based on two prisms of epic myth and the twentieth century history. Through re-telling the Mahabharata as an allegory of Indian colonial and post-colonial history, Tharoor employs humour, parody and irony to challenge the heroism of those in power, the innocence of nationalist revelations, and the triumphs of the post-Independence democracy.

The recent criticism highlights that Tharoor exposes the ludicrousness of the Indian form of democracy, leadership, and the continuation of colonial legacies in contemporary governance in an intricate intertextual story. Satire is the most important channel through which the hypocrisy of the political environment, social conflicts, and corruption within the institutions are dramatized. In this paper, the theme of satire will be central to The Great Indian Novel: Tharoor rewrites history in a comic way that makes readers see old narratives in



a new light and anticipates the disjuncture between the ideal of a nation and its political performance.

### **Research Methodology:**

The research study employs a qualitative, interpretive methodology grounded in close reading and thematic analysis. The primary text is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, read alongside selected critical essays that treat its postcolonial, historical, and satirical dimensions. It includes following steps:

- ✓ Identifying major satirical targets in the novel (colonial rule, nationalist leadership, post-Independence politics).
- ✓ Analysing key episodes and character portrayals (e.g., Gangaji, Dhritarashtra, Priya Duryodhani) for satirical techniques such as parody, exaggeration, inversion, and irony.
- ✓ Relating these narrative strategies to theoretical discussions of postcolonial rewriting and historiographic metafiction (i.e., fiction that self-consciously rewrites history).

Incorporating secondary criticism that reads the novel as a postcolonial satire of Indian democracy and historical representation.

### **Literature Review:**

Scholars generally agree that *The Great Indian Novel* is a landmark in Indian English fiction because it fuses epic narrative, national history, and political satire, Tharoor lays plain the absurdities of India's democratic system, its leadership failures, and the enduring influence of colonial structures within contemporary governance. By transforming the Mahabharata into a retelling of the independence movement and what followed, Tharoor undermines conventional nationalist storylines and critiques contradictions in India's journey from colony to postcolonial state.

Another critic notes that Tharoor by blending satire, allegorical elements, self-referential techniques, and rich intertextual links, the text reveals the unreliable nature of historical accounts and underscores how literature can challenge and undermine prevailing political ideologies. Here, satire is not just mockery but a method of critical inquiry into how histories are constructed and remembered.

A 2015 article specifically on satire in *The Great Indian Novel* observes that Tharoor, "as a postmodern writer, uses different narrative strategy such as parody, irony, and caricature to demystify the sacred aura surrounding national leaders and events" (Nayak, 70). Similarly, an analysis of character portrayal points out that he "employs magic realism and parody to subvert heroic narratives from the *Mahabharata*, transforming epic heroes into flawed characters" (Reddy, 4).

Cultural-studies approaches emphasize the novel's representation of India's diversity and conflicts. One article remarks that *The Great Indian Novel* "highlights both the privileges and shortcomings of India's diversity," using myth and history to represent "the facts of Indian cultural life and the layout of the Indian nation". Another broader study on Tharoor's historical fiction states that his novels "challenge popular Western conceptions of historical discourse"



by “telling fictitious accounts of Indian history” that are self-consciously imaginative. Taken together; these studies situate Tharoor’s fiction at the intersection of satire, postcolonial critique, and narrative experimentation. They also support the central claim: satire in *The Great Indian Novel* functions as a powerful tool for re-examining both colonial and postcolonial power structures.

### **Analysis and Discussion: Satire as Postcolonial Strategy in *The Great Indian Novel*: Epic Intertextuality and the Rewriting of History:**

Tharoor’s most striking move is to recast major figures of Indian history as characters from the *Mahabharata*. Gandhi appears as Gangaji, Nehru as Dhritarashtra’s offspring, and Indira Gandhi as Priya Duryodhani, among others. Scholars note that by casting historical personalities like Gandhi, Nehru, and Indira Gandhi in the guise of epic figures, Tharoor is able both to interrogate colonial frameworks of writing history and to critically examine how national identity has been shaped in the period after independence. In the novel, the narrator Ved Vyas presents his tale as an openly imaginative rewriting. Reddy notes that the text “relies mainly on parody and dark humour” as it “traces the genesis of modern post-colonial India through a reworking of the ancient epics of *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*” (Reddy, 2). This blending of sacred myth with modern politics itself is satirical: by putting revered leaders into the roles of epic heroes and villains, Tharoor deflates excessive reverence and invites more human, critical scrutiny. The narrative’s self-aware tone further strengthens its satirical effect. One postcolonial interpretation characterizes the novel as possessing rich, layered intertextuality that can be demanding for readers who lack background in Indian epics or political history, yet offers significant insight to those prepared to recognize how mythic elements intertwine with political commentary. In this way, Tharoor signals that all histories are, to some extent, narrative constructions—open to revision and re-interpretation.

### **Satirising Nationalist Icons: Gangaji and Dhritarashtra:**

Gangaji, the Gandhian figure, is one of Tharoor’s most carefully balanced satirical portraits. As one scholar points out, portraying Gandhi as Gangaji playfully challenges the idealized, saint-like persona attributed to him, while also drawing attention to the human imperfections embedded in his leadership. By preserving the aura of moral authority but foregrounding eccentricities, Tharoor highlights both the power and the limits of charismatic nationalism.

Dhritarashtra, who stands in for the Congress establishment and Nehruvian leadership, is similarly treated as a mixture of idealism and blindness. Critics remark that Tharoor “mocks earlier respected factual figures while criticizing the old magnificent works and lores of the Indian emancipation fight”. The king’s literal and metaphorical blindness becomes shorthand for the failures of those who inherited power after Independence: they see themselves as heirs to a just struggle yet ignore emerging inequalities and corruption. Tharoor It shifts gracefully among satire, parody, emotional depth, and gravity, producing a blended tone that mirrors the text’s own mixture of themes. The hybridity of tone mirrors the hybridity of postcolonial identity: reverence for the freedom struggle coexists with disappointment at its outcomes.

### **Priya Duryodhani and the Emergency: Power, Hubris, and Dark Humour:**



Priya Duryodhani, Tharoor's version of Indira Gandhi, concentrates much of the novel's political satire. Scholars working within cultural studies argue that the novel opens with Gandhi's ethical vision and ends by depicting the decline of the leaders who followed him, intertwining mythic narratives with historical personalities to illustrate the realities of Indian cultural experience and the shaping of the Indian nation.

Through Priya Duryodhani, Tharoor satirizes the Emergency and the centralisation of power. Although exact fictional quotations from the novel are often paraphrased in criticism, scholars underline that Priya Duryodhani is depicted as ambitious, authoritarian, and adept at manipulating the language of national unity for personal control. The choice of Duryodhani's name already signals a critical stance: the epic villain's association with greed and stubbornness colours the reader's view of Emergency-era politics. Thus, rather than offering a straightforward condemnation, the novel stages the Emergency as the tragicomic climax of a much longer story about how power is desired, justified, and abused.

#### **Communalism, Violence, and the Limits of Idealism:**

Although *The Great Indian Novel* is primarily a re-telling of national politics at the centre, Tharoor's later fiction, such as *Riot*, (2001) amplifies his concern with communalism and the manipulation of history. An article on *Riot* notes that by presenting "voices from both the Hindu and the Muslim communities, he tries to prove how history is exploited for vested interests," showing "the dark reality of communalism and subsequent riots" (Sharma, 2). When read together, these novels reveal a consistent thematic preoccupation: the gap between India's plural, secular ideals and the realities of communal tension and political opportunism. In *The Great Indian Novel*, this appears in the way communal divisions and Partition are woven into the epic structure; in *Riot*, it appears as the immediate and violent breakdown of law and order. Satire in the earlier text prepares readers to question simplified stories of harmony, while the later, more sombre narrative underscores the human cost when those questions go unasked. This intertextual layering indicates that Tharoor's novel skillfully fuses historical events, mythic traditions, and imaginative storytelling to create a richly textured narrative that reflects India's cultural self-understanding, even as it emphasizes that this identity remains continually debated and unsettled. Satire, then, becomes a way of acknowledging both the splendor and the fractures of the national story.

#### **Satire, Style, and Reader Engagement:**

Apart from thematic depth, Tharoor's distinctive stylistic techniques amplify the effectiveness of his satire. A recent analysis of his satirical method praises his rich command of language and sharp intellectual agility, arguing that satire functions as a central artistic strategy that entertains readers while simultaneously encouraging thoughtful critique.

His narrative frequently breaks the fourth wall, addresses the reader directly, and reflects on its own status as a "great Indian novel," all of which mark it as a work of metafiction. This self-consciousness reminds readers that they are engaging with a constructed version of history; it invites them to compare it with school textbooks, political speeches, and media narratives. As it is observed that, in *The Great Indian Novel* Satire, rather than serving as a tool for outright rejection, functions as a means of analytical exploration, enabling Tharoor to probe political double standards, the decline of public institutions, and the



inconsistencies rooted in post-independence nationalism. This underscores the argument of the present paper: satire in Tharoor's fiction is deeply serious in purpose, even when it is playful in tone.

### Conclusion:

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* demonstrates how fiction can participate in the ongoing negotiation of national memory. By retelling the *Mahabharata* as an allegory of India's modern political history, Tharoor uses satire to dismantle heroic myths, question the infallibility of leaders, and expose the continuities between colonial and postcolonial power structures. His portraits of figures such as Gangaji, Dhritarashtra, and Priya Duryodhani reveal both the idealism and the failures embedded in India's political journey, inviting readers to adopt a more critical, historically aware perspective. Critics highlight that Tharoor weaves together satire, allegorical techniques, self-reflexive narration, and intertextual references to demonstrate the fundamental unreliability and fluidity of historical accounts. Making visible how stories of the nation are always shaped by perspective and interest

In this sense, satire functions not as mere ridicule but as a postcolonial strategy: it challenges official histories, opens space for alternative voices, and encourages scepticism toward any narrative that claims absolute authority. At a broader level, Tharoor's fiction suggests that laughter and irreverence are vital tools for democratic cultures. By allowing readers to see familiar leaders and events through the distorting mirror of epic parody, *The Great Indian Novel* teaches that nations, like epics, can be rewritten—and that such rewriting is essential if postcolonial societies are to confront their own contradictions honestly. Future research might extend this thematic focus to Tharoor's other novels, such as *Show Business* and *Riot*, to trace how his satire engages with media culture and communal politics. For now, it is clear that Tharoor's satirical imagination offers a powerful way of thinking about the fiction of the nation itself.

### References

- Communal Violence in Shashi Tharoor's *Riot*. *International Web of Indian English*, 2022. Print.
- Nayak, P. "Satire in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*." *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities*, vol. 3, no. 2, 2015. Print.
- Reddy, S. "Satire of Characters in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*." *Academia.edu*, 2020. Print.
- Tharoor, Shashi. *Riot: A Love Story*. Penguin Books India, 2001.
- Singh, Kavita. "Historical Representation in Shashi Tharoor's Novels." *International Journal of Research and Analytical Reviews*, vol. 11, no. 2, 2022. Print.



## *Literary Cognizance*

ISSN- 2395-7522 (Online) Imp. Fact.6.21 (IIJF)

**An International Refereed / Peer Reviewed  
e-Journal of English Language, Literature & Criticism**

**Vol.- V, Issue- 2, September 2024**



This is an Open Access e-Journal Published Under A Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

*To Cite the Article: Palve, Sandip, "Rewriting the Nation with Delight: Satire and Postcolonial Memory in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel". Literary Cognizance, V-V, 2 (Sept., 2024): 240-245. Web.*

