

Nation as Narrative: Myth, Memory, and Postcolonial Historiography in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract

How does a nation tell the story of its past, and what happens when that story is retold through myth? These questions lie at the heart of Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which reimagines modern Indian history through the characters, conflicts, and narrative patterns of the *Mahabharata*. By bringing the ancient epic into conversation with colonial rule, the Indian freedom struggle, and post-independence politics, Tharoor challenges the distinction between historical fact and cultural memory. This article examines how the novel uses myth, satire, and narrative reconstruction to question established accounts of Indian nationhood. Drawing on Benedict Anderson's understanding of the nation as an imagined community, Linda Hutcheon's concept of historiographic metafiction, and Maurice Halbwachs's theory of collective memory, the study explores the ways in which history becomes meaningful through storytelling. It argues that Tharoor's use of the *Mahabharata* offers a powerful means of interpreting the contradictions of Indian nationalism while exposing the ambitions, rivalries, and political failures that continue after independence. At the same time, the novel raises questions about the limits of using a single epic tradition to represent a nation as culturally and historically diverse as India. By examining the relationship between myth, memory, political satire, and narrative authority, this article argues that *The Great Indian Novel* presents national identity as an ongoing process of interpretation rather than a settled account of the past.

Keywords

Keywords: Shashi Tharoor; *The Great Indian Novel*; myth; cultural memory; postcolonial historiography; nationalism; political satire; Indian English fiction.

Introduction

Every nation has stories about its past. Some celebrate the courage of those who fought for freedom; others remember political struggles, social conflicts, and moments of collective suffering. Over time, these stories become part of how people understand their identity and their place in the world. Yet national history is rarely as straightforward as it appears. The events themselves may belong to the past, but their meanings continue to change according to who tells the story, what is remembered, and what is left out.

This relationship between history and storytelling is particularly important in postcolonial societies. For countries that experienced colonial rule, writing history often involves challenging accounts produced under imperial authority and reclaiming the experiences of those whose voices were marginalised. However, independence does not bring an end to the struggle over historical interpretation. New nations must also confront the contradictions within their own political systems and question the narratives through which they understand themselves.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* offers an engaging exploration of these concerns. First published in 1989, the novel retells significant aspects of modern Indian history through the

framework of the *Mahabharata*. Characters and conflicts from the epic are reimagined in relation to political personalities and events associated with colonial India, the independence movement, and the decades that followed. Through this unusual combination of myth and political history, Tharoor creates a narrative that is at once playful, critical, and deeply concerned with the making of the Indian nation.

The novel's originality lies not simply in its identification of modern political figures with epic characters. Its more important contribution is the way it makes readers reconsider the relationship between inherited stories and historical experience. The *Mahabharata* becomes a means of understanding modern India, while modern political realities give the epic new meanings. The two narratives continually illuminate and challenge one another.

The title itself invites reflection. By calling his work *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor invokes the ambition of telling a story on a national scale. The title also recalls the cultural significance of the *Mahabharata*, a narrative that has shaped generations of readers and listeners. Yet the word "great" carries an ironic undertone. The political history presented in the novel is not simply a tale of heroic leaders and national achievement. It is also a story of ambition, rivalry, compromise, and the failure of political ideals.

This article argues that *The Great Indian Novel* presents the nation as a narrative continually shaped by myth, memory, and political interpretation. Tharoor's use of the *Mahabharata* allows him to question the familiar story of India's journey from colonial subjection to national independence. His satire reveals that freedom, although historically transformative, does not automatically resolve the conflicts and inequalities that shape political life.

The article also considers a limitation of this narrative strategy. Can one epic tradition adequately represent the experiences of a country marked by religious, linguistic, regional, caste, and cultural differences? This question is essential to understanding both the achievements and the tensions of Tharoor's literary project.

Myth and the Rewriting of History

The *Mahabharata* provides the central narrative framework of *The Great Indian Novel*. Its world of family rivalries, competing claims to authority, political alliances, moral dilemmas, and struggles for power offers Tharoor a rich vocabulary for examining modern Indian politics. By adapting these familiar patterns, he places contemporary history within a cultural tradition that readers may already recognise.

The relationship between the epic and modern history, however, is not a simple one-to-one correspondence. Tharoor does more than replace mythological names with those of political figures. He uses the similarities between the two worlds to reveal recurring patterns of human behaviour and political ambition. The desire for power, the struggle for legitimacy, and the conflict between personal loyalty and public responsibility appear in both narratives, although they emerge from very different historical circumstances.

This approach challenges the assumption that modern political life represents a complete break from the past. Independence transformed India's political status, but the struggle for power did not end with the departure of colonial rulers. Rivalries continued, leadership became contested, and political ideals were repeatedly tested by the realities of governance. Through the epic framework, Tharoor draws attention to these continuities without suggesting that modern India simply repeats the history of the *Mahabharata*.

The use of myth also changes the way history is read. An event that might appear as an isolated political development acquires a broader symbolic meaning when placed alongside an epic conflict. At the same time, the modern context prevents the mythological parallel from being accepted without question. The reader must consider where the comparison works and where it breaks down.

This tension is one of the novel's most effective literary strategies. The epic gives modern political events a sense of historical depth, while satire exposes the absurdity of treating contemporary leaders as unquestionable heroes. Political personalities acquire the scale of epic figures, but their ambitions and failures often undermine the grandeur associated

with that tradition.

Tharoor's treatment of myth is therefore neither a straightforward celebration of India's ancient past nor an attempt to replace historical analysis with mythology. Rather, myth becomes a way of asking difficult questions about the present. It allows the novel to examine how political power operates, how leaders construct their authority, and why the achievement of national freedom does not necessarily lead to ethical political conduct.

The Nation as an Imagined Community

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* provides a useful starting point for understanding the relationship between storytelling and national identity. Anderson argues that a nation is an imagined political community: its members feel connected to one another even though most will never meet personally. Shared histories, cultural symbols, and narratives help create this sense of belonging.

Tharoor's novel can be read in this context because it uses a familiar epic tradition to connect the experiences of modern India with a wider cultural memory. The *Mahabharata* becomes more than a literary source; it provides a framework through which the nation's political past can be interpreted. The relationship between epic and history encourages readers to see modern political events as part of a larger story about authority, conflict, and collective identity.

Yet the novel does not present national identity as uncomplicated or harmonious. The history of India includes competing political interests, different understandings of freedom, and experiences that cannot always be brought together under a single national narrative. Tharoor's satire draws attention to these tensions by exposing the distance between the ideals associated with nationhood and the behaviour of those who exercise political power.

The independence movement occupies an important place in the modern Indian imagination because it represents a shared struggle against colonial rule. However, the meaning of independence changes when the narrative moves towards the political realities of the postcolonial state. The promise of freedom must now be measured against questions of governance, democratic responsibility, and the distribution of power.

By placing these developments within an epic structure, Tharoor complicates the idea of national progress. The nation is not presented as a finished achievement but as a continuing political and cultural process. Its identity depends not only on the events that shaped its past but also on how those events are remembered and interpreted.

The novel thus suggests that national unity cannot be understood simply as the possession of a common history. It also involves disagreements over what that history means. A nation's story may create a sense of belonging, but it can also conceal differences when one version of the past is treated as the only legitimate account.

Cultural Memory and the Politics of Remembering

Memory is central to the way communities understand themselves. People do not remember the past in isolation; their recollections are influenced by family histories, cultural traditions, institutions, and the stories shared by the societies in which they live. Maurice Halbwachs develops this argument in *On Collective Memory*, where he examines the social frameworks through which memories are formed and reconstructed.

The *Mahabharata* provides one such framework in Tharoor's novel. Its characters and conflicts have circulated through literature, performance, oral storytelling, and popular culture for centuries. Readers encounter the epic not merely as a written text but as part of a wider cultural inheritance.

Tharoor draws upon this familiarity to make modern political history more immediately recognisable. When contemporary events are placed alongside epic conflicts, they acquire meanings that extend beyond their immediate historical circumstances. Questions of loyalty, legitimacy, responsibility, and ambition become part of a continuing conversation between the past and the present.

However, cultural memory is never entirely neutral. Communities select particular stories, emphasise certain events, and

allow other experiences to fade from collective attention. The same process occurs when national histories are constructed. Some figures become symbols of freedom, sacrifice, or leadership, while the contributions and suffering of others receive less attention.

This problem becomes especially significant in a country as diverse as India. The *Mahabharata* is an influential cultural text, but it cannot represent every regional tradition, religious community, social experience, or historical memory within the nation. Its use as a framework for modern Indian history therefore raises questions about the relationship between cultural familiarity and national representation.

Tharoor's novel can be read as both an affirmation of cultural memory and an invitation to examine its limits. The epic gives the narrative a recognisable structure, but the reader must also consider whose histories become visible through that structure and whose experiences remain outside it.

The significance of the novel lies in this unresolved relationship. Cultural memory can help people make sense of the present, but it can also simplify the past when inherited stories are treated as complete explanations of historical experience.

History, Fiction, and Narrative Authority

The relationship between history and fiction is another important aspect of Tharoor's narrative. Historical events do not speak for themselves. They are selected, organised, and interpreted through accounts written by historians, political leaders, journalists, and other narrators. These accounts may be supported by evidence, but the meanings assigned to events are also influenced by questions of perspective and emphasis.

Linda Hutcheon's *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* provides a useful framework for examining this relationship. Her discussion of historiographic metafiction explores fictional works that engage with historical events while drawing attention to the processes through which the past is represented.

The Great Indian Novel can be approached through this framework because it refuses to reproduce modern Indian history in a conventional chronological form. Instead, Tharoor rearranges historical material through the structures of the *Mahabharata*. The reader is encouraged to recognise both the historical references and the literary choices through which those references are interpreted.

The novel does not suggest that historical events are unreal simply because they can be narrated in different ways. Its more important insight is that the meaning of the past depends partly on the stories through which it is understood. A political event can be remembered as a moment of national achievement, a failure of leadership, or a turning point in democratic life, depending on the questions asked of it.

The narrative figure of Vyasa is particularly relevant to this concern. Associated with the telling of the *Mahabharata*, Vyasa connects the novel's modern political history with the authority of the epic storyteller. The act of narrating India's past becomes part of the subject of the novel itself.

This raises a question that extends beyond the text: who has the authority to tell the story of a nation? Official histories may privilege particular political perspectives, while literary narratives can challenge established accounts by introducing irony, alternative interpretations, and uncomfortable questions. Neither form should be accepted uncritically, but literature can make the constructed nature of historical representation especially visible.

Tharoor's satire encourages readers to question the authority of political leaders and the stories told about them. By exposing contradictions between public ideals and private ambitions, the novel challenges the tendency to turn national history into a simple account of heroic achievement.

Political Satire and the Unfinished Promise of Independence

The Indian independence movement created enormous expectations about the future of the nation. Freedom from colonial

rule promised political self-determination and the possibility of building a more just society. Yet the decades following independence revealed that the end of colonial government could not, by itself, resolve the problems of political authority, social inequality, and institutional accountability.

Tharoor explores this contradiction through satire. His representation of modern Indian politics draws attention to the distance between the ideals of national liberation and the conduct of political

leaders. Ambition, rivalry, loyalty, and the desire to preserve power complicate the image of politics as a selfless service to the nation.

The epic framework intensifies this criticism. Political conflicts acquire the scale of mythological struggles, but their outcomes often reveal the weaknesses of the people involved. The result is a narrative in which the language of greatness is continually tested against the realities of political behaviour.

This does not mean that the novel rejects the significance of independence. Rather, it questions the assumption that independence automatically produces a morally transformed political order. The achievement of freedom creates new responsibilities, and the legitimacy of the postcolonial state must be judged by how it responds to those responsibilities.

The Emergency of 1975–77 offers an especially important context for this argument. The suspension of democratic freedoms during this period exposed the vulnerability of institutions associated with independent India. The crisis challenged the belief that democratic government would necessarily protect citizens against the misuse of political power.

C. S. Bhagya's study of the Emergency in *The Great Indian Novel* examines how the crisis becomes a turning point in the novel's representation of postcolonial India. Bhagya also draws attention to the role of gender in the narrative, showing how the political crisis is connected to the representation of women and the body.

This critical perspective is valuable because political crises are not experienced equally by everyone. Their consequences vary according to gender, class, social position, and access to power. A national narrative centred exclusively on political leaders may overlook the experiences of ordinary people whose lives are affected by the decisions of the state.

The Emergency therefore reveals a central contradiction in the idea of the postcolonial nation. The country may celebrate its freedom from colonial domination, yet its own institutions can become instruments of coercion. Tharoor's satirical reconstruction encourages readers to recognise that national identity must remain open to criticism, particularly when the state fails to uphold the principles on which it claims legitimacy.

Gender and the Limits of a Unified National Story

The question of whose experiences are remembered becomes particularly important when the novel is examined through a gender-sensitive perspective. Women have often occupied symbolic positions in national narratives, representing cultural continuity, sacrifice, honour, or the suffering of the community. Such representations may give women symbolic importance while limiting their recognition as independent political and historical subjects.

The *Mahabharata* offers a complex field for examining these questions. Its female characters are involved in conflicts over authority, justice, loyalty, and social responsibility. Their experiences reveal the ways in which political struggles affect individuals whose voices may not determine the final outcome of those struggles.

The figure of Draupadi, in particular, brings questions of humiliation, vulnerability, and moral responsibility into the epic's political world. When the epic is reworked as a narrative of modern

Indian history, such questions invite readers to consider how gendered experiences become part of the story of the nation.

However, the comparison between epic women and modern political subjects must be made carefully. Mythological characters cannot simply be treated as direct equivalents of historical individuals. Their value lies in the questions they make possible about the relationship between power, representation, and agency.

Bhagya's analysis of the Emergency provides a starting point for exploring this issue. Her argument that gender is central

to the novel's representation of political crisis suggests that the relationship between national history and individual experience deserves closer attention.

A broader gender-sensitive reading also asks whether the national narrative gives women a voice or primarily uses their experiences to communicate the concerns of male political actors. The distinction matters because representation does not necessarily guarantee agency.

This issue connects with the article's larger argument about cultural memory. If a nation is narrated through inherited epic structures, it becomes necessary to examine both what those structures make visible and what they leave unexplored. The nation cannot be fully understood through its celebrated leaders and public events alone; it must also be considered through the lives and experiences that conventional narratives often place at the margins.

Conclusion

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* offers a distinctive way of thinking about the relationship between myth, memory, and Indian political history. By bringing the *Mahabharata* into conversation with the events of modern India, Tharoor challenges the assumption that the past can be understood through a single, settled narrative. His use of epic structure creates connections between cultural inheritance and contemporary political experience, while his satire exposes the contradictions that lie beneath the language of national greatness.

The novel's most important contribution is its insistence that the nation must be understood through the stories told about it. These stories create continuity, preserve cultural memory, and help people imagine a shared identity. Yet they can also simplify historical experience, privilege particular perspectives, and obscure the voices of those who do not fit dominant narratives.

Tharoor's rewriting of the *Mahabharata* brings these possibilities and limitations into view. Myth becomes a way of interpreting modern politics, but the historical realities of colonialism, independence, democratic government, and political crisis prevent the epic framework from offering a complete explanation of the nation. The relationship between myth and history remains productive precisely because neither can fully contain the other.

The novel's treatment of post-independence politics also challenges the idea that national freedom marks the end of historical struggle. Independence represents a defining achievement, but the promise of the nation must be continually examined in relation to political responsibility, democratic freedom, and social justice. The Emergency makes this challenge especially clear by revealing how easily the ideals of an independent nation can be undermined by the misuse of power.

Ultimately, *The Great Indian Novel* suggests that national identity is neither fixed nor beyond question. It develops through the continuing interpretation of cultural traditions, historical events, and collective memories. To narrate the nation is therefore also to examine the choices through which its past is remembered.

By turning the *Mahabharata* into a framework for reconsidering modern Indian history, Tharoor creates a space in which inherited narratives can be revisited and political authority can be questioned. The novel reminds readers that the story of India cannot be reduced to a single account of greatness or failure. It remains an unfinished narrative, shaped by competing memories and the continuing need to ask whose experiences count as history.

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