

Postcolonial Themes and Cultural Critique in Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

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Abstract- *Shashi Tharoor's An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India offers a robust critique of British colonialism, focusing on its cultural, economic, and political ramifications. This article explores the postcolonial themes embedded in Tharoor's work and examines how his critique aligns with broader postcolonial theoretical frameworks. Drawing on thinkers such as Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, and Frantz Fanon, the article delves into Tharoor's analysis of cultural imperialism, historical revisionism, and the psychological legacy of colonialism. Tharoor dismantles the myth of benevolent colonialism by highlighting British exploitation of India's economy, destruction of indigenous industries, and imposition of Western cultural norms. He critiques the continued "colonial hangover" in India, manifested in the persistence of colonial-era institutions, laws, and cultural attitudes. This article argues that Tharoor's work significantly contributes to the decolonization of knowledge, as it reclaims suppressed Indian narratives and challenges Eurocentric histories. Tharoor's work validates and acknowledges the importance of these narratives, making it a vital text for understanding the enduring impact of colonialism and the ongoing process of postcolonial recovery and resistance. The article further argues that Tharoor's work transcends conventional nationalist historiography by combining literary narration with historical scholarship. Rather than merely documenting colonial atrocities, Tharoor interrogates the epistemological foundations of imperial history and advocates the recovery of indigenous knowledge systems. Consequently, *An Era of Darkness* emerges not only as a historical critique but also as a significant intervention in contemporary debates on decolonization, historical justice, and cultural identity within postcolonial societies.*

Key Words: *Postcolonialism, Shashi Tharoor, Cultural Critique, British Colonialism, Decolonization*

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016) is a potent and compelling narrative that dismantles the romanticised view of British colonialism in India. Tharoor, a distinguished diplomat and author, presents a multifaceted analysis that intersects postcolonial theory with cultural studies, shedding light on the cultural, economic, and political devastation brought about by the British Empire. This article explores Tharoor's work's postcolonial themes and cultural critiques, emphasizing their resonance with broader postcolonial discourse. Tharoor's work is not just a critique of British colonialism but part of a larger intellectual community engaged in understanding and challenging its legacies.

Although *An Era of Darkness* has attracted considerable scholarly attention, much of the existing criticism concentrates on its historical arguments, economic analysis, or nationalist perspective. Comparatively fewer studies examine the text through an integrated postcolonial framework that connects cultural critique, historical revisionism, psychological decolonization, and epistemic resistance. The present study addresses this gap by demonstrating how Tharoor's narrative simultaneously functions as historical reconstruction and postcolonial intervention, thereby contributing to broader discussions in postcolonial literary and cultural studies.

II. POSTCOLONIAL THEORY AND HISTORICAL REVISIONISM

At the heart of Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* is a project of historical revisionism that seeks to correct the distorted narratives often propagated by Western historiography. For centuries, British colonialism was portrayed as a "civilizing mission," a narrative that justified the empire's exploitation under the guise of modernizing its colonies. Postcolonial theory, articulated by thinkers like Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha, foregrounds the importance of reclaiming historical narratives that colonial powers have subjugated or erased. Tharoor's critique aligns with Said's concept of "Orientalism," which argues that the West's construction of the East served to justify imperial dominance. Said's Orientalism posits that the West imposed a vision of the East as backward and inferior, which rationalized its domination.

Tharoor systematically dismantles the notion that British colonialism was a "civilizing mission," instead revealing the brutal exploitation and systematic dehumanization that marked British rule in India. He challenges the colonial myths of development by highlighting how British policies drained India's wealth, decimated local industries, and fostered a culture of institutionalized racism. Tharoor critiques specific colonial policies, such as the economic exploitation of India's resources and wealth for Britain and the deliberate destruction of industries, such as textiles, once a flourishing sector of the Indian economy. His analysis resonates with the concept of the "subaltern," as defined by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, wherein the voices and experiences of the colonized are marginalized or silenced in the dominant colonial discourse. Tharoor contributes to the postcolonial endeavour of restoring agency to the colonized subject by providing a platform for these voices.

Tharoor's revision of colonial history also reflects Michel Foucault's understanding of the relationship between power and knowledge. Colonial governments exercised political authority not merely through military force but also through the production of historical narratives that legitimized imperial domination. By interrogating official

colonial records, parliamentary speeches, and imperial historiography, Tharoor exposes the ideological construction of historical "truth." His narrative, therefore, challenges the monopoly of colonial discourse over historical knowledge and repositions Indian experiences at the centre of historical interpretation.

Tharoor's work, then, continues this postcolonial tradition of revisionism. His narrative not only rewrites history from the perspective of the colonized but also functions as a critical intervention in modern debates about colonialism's lingering impact. By bringing India's suppressed history to the forefront, Tharoor effectively challenges the erasures and silences of British historiography, insisting on a reckoning with the empire's atrocities.

III. CULTURAL IMPERIALISM AND THE ERASURE OF INDIAN IDENTITY

A central theme in *An Era of Darkness* is the cultural imperialism exercised by the British, which sought to supplant Indian cultural identities with Western ideals. Tharoor meticulously documents how British education policies, legal systems, and language imposition sought to create a class of Anglicised Indians who would serve as intermediaries between the colonisers and the colonised. This phenomenon is reminiscent of Bhabha's concept of "mimicry," where the colonized subject adopts the language and customs of the colonizer but, in doing so, is caught in a state of ambivalence, neither fully Indian nor entirely British. Tharoor illustrates how this "class of interpreters," educated in English and shaped by British ideas, became estranged from their native culture, creating a deep internal conflict that continues to affect India's cultural landscape.

Tharoor repeatedly refers to Thomas Babington Macaulay's famous "Minute on Indian Education" (1835), which advocated creating a class of Indians who would be "Indian in blood and colour, but English in tastes, opinions, morals and intellect." Tharoor interprets this policy not simply as educational reform but as a calculated strategy of cultural domination. The institutional preference for English education marginalized traditional centres of

learning, Sanskrit scholarship, Persian administration, and regional literary traditions, thereby weakening India's intellectual autonomy.

Tharoor emphasises the psychological consequences of this cultural imperialism, mainly how it created a deep sense of inferiority among Indians. He references the introduction of English as the medium of education and the marginalization of indigenous languages and knowledge systems as a form of epistemic violence—a deliberate strategy by the British to impose their cultural dominance. The imposition of British cultural norms, from dress codes to language, eroded Indian self-confidence and contributed to the internalization of colonial ideologies, leaving a lasting imprint on Indian society. Tharoor's critique echoes Frantz Fanon's analysis in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), where Fanon argues that the colonized subject experiences profound alienation and psychological trauma due to adopting the colonizer's worldview. This cultural erasure leads to a fractured identity, one that is still felt in postcolonial nations as they grapple with the legacy of colonial influence.

Tharoor's work thus expands the postcolonial discourse on cultural imperialism by focusing on the long-term psychological damage inflicted on Indian society. His exploration of how colonial policies shaped modern India's educational system, language use, and social hierarchy highlights the need for postcolonial nations to reclaim and revalorise their indigenous cultures in the face of lingering colonial structures.

IV. ECONOMIC EXPLOITATION AND THE MYTH OF BENEVOLENT COLONIALISM

Tharoor's economic critique in *An Era of Darkness* forms a crucial aspect of his postcolonial analysis. British colonialism is often defended through the narrative that the empire modernised India by developing infrastructure, such as railways, and introducing Western education and legal systems. Tharoor deconstructs this myth of benevolent colonialism, demonstrating how these initiatives were designed primarily to benefit Britain at the expense of India's economic welfare. Far from improving

India's economy, British policies deliberately undermined local industries and fostered a system of economic exploitation. The systematic deindustrialization of India, particularly in the textile industry, is a crucial example Tharoor uses to show how Britain destroyed Indian craftsmanship to eliminate competition for British manufacturers.

This critique of colonial economic exploitation aligns with the postcolonial framework articulated by scholars such as Ania Loomba, who argue that colonialism was fundamentally an economic enterprise aimed at extracting wealth from the colonies. Tharoor's arguments also draw on economic historians such as Dadabhai Naoroji, who formulated the "drain theory" to explain how British colonialism resulted in the transfer of wealth from India to Britain. Naoroji's work is crucial to understanding the scale of economic damage inflicted on India. Tharoor brings this historical context into contemporary discourse, underscoring India's staggering economic losses under British rule. Tharoor reinforces his argument through economic evidence, noting that India's share of global GDP declined dramatically during British rule—from approximately 23 per cent in the early eighteenth century to less than 4 per cent at independence. Such statistics illustrate that colonialism functioned primarily as an extractive economic system rather than an engine of modernization. These figures strengthen Naoroji's Drain Theory and provide empirical support for postcolonial critiques of imperial capitalism.

Tharoor critiques British infrastructure projects, such as the railways, which are often held up as evidence of British generosity. He argues that these projects were intended to serve British commercial interests by facilitating resource extraction rather than promoting Indian development. Tharoor's analysis serves as a counter-narrative to the often-celebrated achievements of British colonialism, exposing the exploitative motives underlying seemingly progressive initiatives. His economic critique contributes significantly to postcolonial scholarship by emphasising the economic devastation that accompanied the British Empire's domination of India.

V. THE LEGACY OF COLONIALISM AND THE POSTCOLONIAL CONDITION

Tharoor's examination of colonialism's lasting impact extends beyond economic exploitation to the cultural and psychological legacies that continue to shape postcolonial India. Even after independence, India continues to struggle with what Tharoor refers to as a "colonial hangover"—a lingering sense of inferiority and the persistent influence of colonial structures in governance, education, and society. Tharoor draws attention to the prevalence of English as the dominant language of government, education, and law, arguing that this is a direct consequence of British colonial policies designed to entrench the supremacy of British culture over Indian traditions.

This "colonial hangover" also finds expression in India's socio-political structures, where colonial-era laws and administrative systems remain largely intact. Tharoor's critique aligns with postcolonial scholars who have examined how the legacies of colonialism continue to influence postcolonial nations long after independence. According to scholars such as Ashis Nandy, postcolonial societies are often caught in a state of mimicry, where the colonial structures of power and knowledge continue to operate, perpetuating the inequalities and injustices of the colonial period. Tharoor's analysis suggests that this persistence of colonial attitudes prevents India from fully realising its postcolonial identity.

Tharoor's call to reassess India's colonial past also intersects with the broader postcolonial project of decolonizing knowledge. He advocates for re-engaging India's precolonial intellectual and cultural traditions, which were systematically marginalised during British rule. By reclaiming these traditions, Tharoor suggests that India can break free from the psychological and cultural legacy of colonialism and assert its own identity on the global stage. This reclamation of indigenous knowledge systems is essential for India's postcolonial recovery, enabling the country to redefine itself outside the framework imposed by colonialism.

Tharoor also suggests that colonial legacies extend beyond institutional structures into contemporary cultural consciousness. Debates concerning language policy, educational curricula, museum collections, restitution of colonial artefacts, and public memory continue to reflect unresolved colonial inheritances. His observations therefore connect India's experience with broader global movements advocating decolonization of education, heritage institutions, and historical narratives.

Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* is, therefore, a critique of the British Empire and a roadmap for postcolonial nations seeking to overcome the legacies of their colonial pasts. Tharoor contributes to the ongoing conversation about decolonisation and national identity in postcolonial scholarship by confronting the cultural, economic, and psychological impacts of colonialism.

VI. CONCLUSION

Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* stands as a powerful postcolonial critique of British colonialism, meticulously deconstructing the myths of a benevolent empire. Through its detailed examination of the economic exploitation, cultural domination, and enduring psychological impact of British rule, the text resonates deeply with postcolonial theory. Tharoor's arguments, grounded in historical revisionism and cultural critique, challenge the glorification of colonialism and call for the decolonization of historical narratives and cultural mindsets. His work aligns with the broader objectives of postcolonial scholarship, which seeks to restore agency to formerly colonised peoples by highlighting their suppressed histories and voices. By drawing attention to the ongoing "colonial hangover" that permeates modern India's institutions and cultural identities, Tharoor's text underscores the long-lasting repercussions of colonialism. His call to re-engage with Indigenous intellectual and cultural traditions emphasizes the importance of reclaiming a postcolonial identity independent of colonial influences. From a broader scholarly perspective, Tharoor's work illustrates how literary non-fiction can function simultaneously as historical inquiry,

political intervention, and cultural criticism. By integrating archival evidence with persuasive narrative techniques, he challenges readers to reconsider the ethical responsibilities of historiography in postcolonial societies. Consequently, *An Era of Darkness* occupies a distinctive position within Indian English non-fiction, demonstrating that historical writing itself can become an instrument of intellectual decolonization.

An Era of Darkness contributes to a deeper understanding of India's colonial experience. It enriches contemporary decolonization and cultural recovery debates, offering a vital perspective for postcolonial scholars and global audiences. The text urges a rethinking of historical and cultural narratives, fostering a critical awareness of how colonial legacies continue to shape modern societies.

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