

Social Concerns in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*: An Analytical Study

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Abstract- *Shashi Tharoor is a social critic. He exposes the Indian society in which a semblance of loveliness in social circles is maintained. As a novelist he exhorts the people to get rid of their social malpractices. In The Great Indian Novel, he expresses his concerns on the burning issues of society and addresses several social concerns through the recreation of characters of The Mahabharata. He turns The Mahabharata into a mirror of the contemporary political scenario in which parallels are drawn between the persona and events of the grand epic and those of contemporary society. He delineates the social conditions of the country in which all the evils in society are practiced by the people openly and shamelessly. He expresses his disappointment at the loss of all noble values of 'dharma' and social greatness after independence. In The Great Indian Novel he exposes the weak nature of the present society and condemns pseudo superficial facade and the wicked hidden reality. In The Great Indian Novel, has presented his social-moral vision by expressing his concern for the social conditions in which there is a lack of conventional values and ethics in contemporary times that have undergone a huge change due to the advent of materialism resulting in the restlessness and anxiety of the people of our society.*

Key Words: Socialist, Consequences, Anxiety, Malpractices, Righteousness, and Colonialism.

I. INTRODUCTION

Shashi Tharoor is one of the foremost writers of contemporary Indian English literature. Besides being a novelist, he is a politician, public intellectual, and commentator whose writings consistently engage with the social, political, and cultural realities of modern India. His literary works combine history, mythology, satire, and political commentary to expose the contradictions embedded within Indian society.

Rather than offering direct condemnation, Tharoor employs wit, irony, and parody to reveal the moral,

social, and political deterioration affecting the nation. His novels advocate ethical governance, social reform, and democratic accountability, emphasizing that both the government and citizens share the responsibility of creating a just and progressive society.

As a social satirist, Tharoor examines the complexities of Indian society by exposing corruption, communalism, political opportunism, and social hypocrisy. His satire is subtle yet incisive, compelling readers to reflect critically on the institutions and practices that shape public life. T. Alagarasan aptly observes:

Shashi Tharoor is a penetrating social satirist gifted with an eagle-eyed vision and ability to bring to the fore all the unnoticed and invisible social malaise. He is an amalgamation of Jonathan Swift, Rabelais, Voltaire, and Charles Dickens. His writings coruscate with witty, sportive, verbal, fantastic, light, and joyous elements.

Sarcasm is allied to irony; in fact, it can be regarded as a form of irony where the ironical intention and content are indubitably made clear. Derivatively, sarcasm is a scathing or biting speech. Tharoor's commanding position in the field of Indian English literature owes to a combination of personal and literary qualities.

Qualities of the first kind are those of passion, humor, honesty, courage, intelligence, and the presence of strong personal convictions. In the second category are qualities like imagination, inventiveness, and stylistic and rhetorical skill.

He is appreciated for his art of using words with the greatest skill and effectiveness. (Alagarasan 01)

Alagarasan's assessment highlights Tharoor's distinctive contribution to Indian English literature.

His satirical vision is rooted not merely in humor but also in a profound concern for the ethical and political condition of society. Like the great satirists of world literature, Tharoor employs irony as a powerful literary strategy to expose hypocrisy, challenge authority, and encourage social introspection.

Tharoor's novels reveal the discrepancy between the outward appearance of social respectability and the underlying realities of corruption, inequality, and injustice. Through carefully crafted characters and situations, he demonstrates how individuals and institutions often conceal moral decay beneath a veneer of civilization and progress.

His fiction urges readers to question prevailing social norms and to recognize the necessity of reform. Commenting on Tharoor's remarkable characterization and his engagement with India's cultural traditions, Alagarasan further remarks:

Tharoor's characters have deeper connections with the social world and are more susceptible to its corruption. The Upanishads, the Scriptures, the Ramayana, and the Mahabharata offer guidance to Tharoor.

He can capture the tone of illiterate Indians, educated aristocrats, political novices, treacherous diplomats, unbeknown autocrats, firebrand religious fanatics, unassuming religious activists, pseudo-religious men, innocent social activists, humbug cine-stars, fraudulent British rulers, and others with consummate precision. (Alagarasan 02)

This observation illustrates the breadth of Tharoor's social vision. Drawing upon India's classical epics and philosophical traditions, he creates characters who represent diverse sections of society.

His ability to portray politicians, religious leaders, bureaucrats, social reformers, and ordinary citizens enables him to present a comprehensive picture of the nation's social and political landscape. Consequently,

his fiction transcends mere storytelling and becomes an incisive commentary on contemporary India.

One of the defining features of Tharoor's narrative technique is his use of insinuation. Instead of making explicit political accusations, he employs symbolism, allegory, parody, and allusion to suggest deeper truths. This indirect mode of criticism allows readers to interpret the political and social realities embedded within his narratives while preserving the artistic integrity of the text.

His novels, particularly *The Great Indian Novel*, demonstrate how mythological parallels can effectively illuminate the contradictions of modern Indian politics. Reflecting on the broad appeal of his writings, Tharoor remarks in an interview with Sreenivasan:

“...I seem to have struck a chord with Indians both in India and amongst those settled abroad. I am always pleasantly surprised at the amount of interest in India such people have, both those who grew up there and those who grew up abroad. Of course, there is also a smaller audience of non-Indians who are interested in India, too.” (Qtd. in Sreenivasan 39)

Tharoor's observation underscores the universal relevance of his works. Although his novels are deeply rooted in Indian history and culture, the social and political issues they address such as corruption, abuse of power, identity, nationalism, and democratic values—possess global significance.

His ability to combine historical insight, literary innovation, and political satire has earned him a distinguished place among contemporary Indian English novelists. Through his fiction, Tharoor continues to inspire readers to critically examine society and to envision a more equitable, democratic, and humane future. Shashi Tharoor occupies a distinguished position in contemporary Indian English literature as a novelist, political thinker, and social commentator whose writings interrogate the complexities of postcolonial India.

His fiction consistently explores the interaction between history, politics, mythology, and society,

revealing the contradictions that have shaped the Indian nation after Independence.

Rather than presenting history as a fixed or objective reality, Tharoor adopts a postmodern narrative strategy that reinterprets historical events through myth, satire, parody, and intertextuality. His novels therefore function not merely as literary narratives but also as incisive critiques of the political, social, and cultural structures that govern modern India.

The Great Indian Novel (1989), Tharoor's first novel, exemplifies this approach. By reconstructing the Mahabharata within the framework of twentieth-century Indian political history, he transforms one of India's most revered epics into a powerful commentary on postcolonial society.

The novel examines the persistence of corruption, political opportunism, communal conflict, social inequality, and moral decline in independent India. Through the parallelism between epic characters and modern political personalities, Tharoor demonstrates that the struggle for power remains remarkably similar across historical periods.

His purpose is not to diminish the significance of the Mahabharata but to employ its enduring ethical framework as a means of evaluating contemporary political and social realities. The novel is widely regarded as one of the most innovative examples of postcolonial rewriting in Indian English fiction.

As B. Samrajya Lakshmi observes, The Great Indian Novel transcends the conventions of the realist novel by reimagining the Mahabharata within the context of modern Indian politics while simultaneously engaging with the postcolonial literary tradition established by writers such as Salman Rushdie. (Lakshmi 07)

Lakshmi's assessment emphasizes the novel's originality in combining mythological structure with historical reconstruction, thereby creating a narrative that is both culturally rooted and politically subversive.

Tharoor's adaptation of the Mahabharata extends beyond a simple retelling of the epic. He appropriates

its characters, symbols, and ethical conflicts to expose the contradictions of post-independence India. The ancient struggle between righteousness (dharma) and ambition becomes a metaphor for the moral dilemmas confronting the modern Indian state.

Political leaders, freedom fighters, administrators, and public institutions are represented through epic counterparts, enabling readers to recognize the continuity of power struggles despite changing historical circumstances. Consequently, mythology becomes an instrument of political criticism rather than merely a repository of religious tradition.

The narrative also re-examines significant historical events associated with colonial rule and the Indian freedom movement. Incidents such as the Bibighar massacre are incorporated into the narrative to illustrate the violence and exploitation that accompanied British colonialism. However, Tharoor does not confine his criticism to the colonial past.

He argues that political independence did not eradicate injustice; instead, many of the oppressive structures of colonial governance were reproduced by India's own political elite. The novel therefore shifts the focus from colonial domination to the failures of postcolonial leadership, suggesting that corruption, authoritarianism, and institutional decay are products of both historical inheritance and contemporary political practice.

An important feature of The Great Indian Novel is its narrative framework, which recalls the traditional relationship between Vyasa and Ganapathi in the composition of the Mahabharata. Tharoor consciously adopts this narrative convention to establish continuity between the ancient epic and modern political history.

As Lakshmi points out, the choice of Ved Vyasa as narrator and Ganapathi as amanuensis constitutes one of the novel's most sophisticated artistic strategies because it reinforces the relationship between myth and history while simultaneously questioning the reliability of historical narration itself (Lakshmi 12).

Through this metafictional device, Tharoor suggests that every historical narrative is shaped by interpretation, selection, and ideological perspective. The centrality of the Mahabharata within Indian cultural consciousness further strengthens the symbolic structure of the novel. For centuries, the epic has influenced Indian philosophy, ethics, literature, religion, and social values.

Its characters continue to function as moral archetypes representing justice, courage, sacrifice, loyalty, and ethical responsibility. As several scholars have observed, the enduring significance of the Mahabharata lies in its exploration of complex moral dilemmas rather than in the presentation of simplistic distinctions between good and evil.

By drawing upon this cultural legacy, Tharoor enables readers to evaluate contemporary political realities against the ethical standards established by the epic tradition. Tharoor has openly acknowledged the literary and intellectual influences that shaped the composition of *The Great Indian Novel*. In the introductory epigraphs, he recognizes the contributions of C. R. Deshpande, P. Lal, and Günter Grass, each of whom represents a different dimension of the novel's conceptual foundation.

Deshpande emphasizes the epic's central place in Indian civilization; P. Lal underscores its continuing relevance for contemporary readers, while Grass insists that literature must preserve historical memory. Together, these perspectives define the philosophical basis of Tharoor's project: the reinterpretation of India's past in order to illuminate the political and social realities of the present.

One of the novel's most significant concerns is the decline of dharma in post-independence India. Throughout the narrative, Tharoor contrasts the ethical ideals associated with the Mahabharata against the corruption and moral compromise that characterize modern politics.

The novel repeatedly questions whether the principles of justice, truth, and public responsibility continue to possess practical significance within contemporary democratic institutions. Through the reflections of Yudhisthira, Tharoor raises

fundamental questions regarding the relevance of righteousness in a society increasingly governed by political expediency and personal ambition.

These philosophical questions do not merely express individual despair; they represent the larger moral crisis confronting the Indian nation after Independence.

The erosion of ethical values is presented as the foundation of numerous social problems. Political corruption, bureaucratic inefficiency, communal violence, economic exploitation, social injustice, and the persistence of caste and class inequalities emerge as consequences of abandoning moral responsibility.

Tharoor argues that democratic institutions cannot function effectively unless they are supported by ethical leadership and civic integrity. His critique therefore extends beyond individual politicians to encompass the broader social culture that tolerates dishonesty, opportunism, and abuse of power.

Despite this pessimistic assessment, the novel ultimately rejects cynicism. Instead of advocating a return to rigid traditionalism or unquestioning acceptance of Western modernity, Tharoor proposes a balanced ethical vision grounded in pluralism, tolerance, and democratic values.

He emphasizes the necessity of respecting cultural diversity while remaining open to critical inquiry and intellectual freedom. The acceptance of multiple perspectives, rather than ideological absolutism, becomes the basis of a healthy democratic society.

Consequently, *The Great Indian Novel* advocates an inclusive understanding of dharma founded upon humanity, justice, and mutual respect rather than religious orthodoxy or political dogmatism. This paper portrays contemporary India as a nation struggling to reconcile technological progress with moral uncertainty.

Scientific advancement, economic modernization, and political development coexist with corruption, social fragmentation, and ideological conflict. Through irony and satire, Tharoor depicts a society attempting to enter the twenty-first century while

remaining burdened by unresolved historical contradictions.

His criticism is not intended to diminish India's achievements but to encourage ethical introspection and democratic renewal. Thus, *The Great Indian Novel* transcends the boundaries of historical fiction and political satire to become a profound exploration of India's postcolonial condition.

By integrating mythology, history, and political allegory, Tharoor demonstrates that literature possesses the capacity to reinterpret the past, critique the present, and imagine a more just future. His novel remains a significant contribution to Indian English literature because it challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between history, power, morality, and national identity in contemporary India.

One of the most compelling aspects of Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is its reinterpretation of the concept of dharma as the ethical foundation of both individual conduct and national life. By re-enacting the celebrated episode of the Mahabharata in which Yudhishthira alone survives the encounter at the enchanted lake because of his unwavering commitment to truth and righteousness, Tharoor establishes a powerful allegorical framework for evaluating the moral condition of postcolonial India.

The episode transcends its mythological origins and becomes a symbolic commentary on the ethical decline of modern Indian society. Through Yudhishthira's dialogue with Dharma, Tharoor suggests that the survival of a nation depends not merely upon political institutions or economic achievements but upon the preservation of justice, integrity, and moral responsibility.

The episode also serves as a critique of the ethical failures that characterize contemporary governance. Tharoor implies that India's crisis is rooted not only in administrative inefficiency but also in the gradual erosion of values that once sustained public life. Political leaders, bureaucrats, and citizens alike have increasingly prioritized personal ambition over collective welfare, resulting in the weakening of

democratic institutions and the fragmentation of social responsibility.

Consequently, the novel presents dharma not as a theological doctrine but as an enduring principle of ethical conduct that should guide political leadership and civic life. B. Samrajya Lakshmi interprets this episode as a symbolic representation of India's moral collapse. According to her,

Tharoor attributes the nation's decline to the replacement of ethical commitment with institutional conformity, political arrogance, selfish leadership, and the inability to translate moral knowledge into responsible action (Lakshmi 24).

Lakshmi further argues that the novel traces India's gradual movement from dharma to adharma, thereby illustrating the transformation of a society once associated with ethical ideals into one increasingly dominated by corruption, materialism, and moral indifference (Lakshmi 26).

Her interpretation reinforces the central argument that *The Great Indian Novel* is fundamentally a meditation on the ethical foundations of nationhood.

A significant dimension of Tharoor's social criticism concerns the contradictions embedded within India's developmental discourse. The novel repeatedly questions the celebratory narratives of industrialization and modernization that dominated the decades following Independence.

While political leaders projected India as an emerging industrial nation, vast sections of the population continued to suffer from poverty, inadequate infrastructure, illiteracy, and limited access to essential public services.

Through irony and satire, Tharoor exposes the disparity between official claims of progress and the lived realities of ordinary citizens. The juxtaposition of industrial expansion with rural deprivation reveals the structural inequalities that persisted despite economic planning and technological advancement.

The significance of this paper lies in its exposure of developmental paradoxes. Tharoor does not reject

industrialization itself; rather, he questions a model of development that privileges statistical achievements over human welfare.

His satire reveals the absurdity of celebrating industrial growth while neglecting the basic needs of the majority of the population. The image of modern factories rising beside impoverished villages symbolizes the coexistence of economic ambition and social neglect. In this manner, the novel critiques a development model that fails to address the fundamental concerns of equity, education, and social justice.

Education occupies a central place in Tharoor's critique of postcolonial society. He argues that the colonial educational system was designed primarily to produce a limited class of clerical workers who could sustain the bureaucratic machinery of the British Empire.

Although India achieved political independence, many of the structural limitations of colonial education remained intact. Instead of democratizing education and empowering rural communities, successive governments often reproduced inherited administrative priorities.

As a result, educational inequality continued to reinforce economic disparities and social exclusion. Tharoor therefore presents education not merely as an instrument of literacy but as the foundation of democratic participation, social mobility, and national development.

Tharoor's treatment of colonialism is equally nuanced. While he unequivocally condemns the exploitative nature of British imperial rule, he also acknowledges certain social reforms introduced during the colonial period. His discussion of widow remarriage illustrates this balanced perspective.

Rather than presenting colonial intervention in simplistic moral terms, the novel recognizes that certain oppressive social customs required reform irrespective of their historical origins.

At the same time, Tharoor emphasizes that genuine social transformation must emerge from the ethical

awakening of society rather than from external political authority. Social progress, therefore, depends upon continuous self-criticism and collective responsibility.

This episode demonstrates that Tharoor's social vision is fundamentally reformist rather than nostalgic. He neither idealizes India's past nor glorifies colonial modernity. Instead, he advocates a critical engagement with tradition in order to preserve its ethical strengths while rejecting practices that perpetuate injustice and discrimination. Such an approach reflects the broader postcolonial objective of reconstructing national identity through critical reflection rather than ideological absolutism.

The philosophical center of *The Great Indian Novel* remains the concept of dharma. Throughout the novel, Tharoor expands its meaning beyond religious orthodoxy and interprets it as a comprehensive ethical principle encompassing justice, duty, accountability, and public responsibility.

Unlike rigid moral codes, dharma evolves in accordance with changing historical circumstances while retaining its commitment to truth and human welfare. This dynamic understanding of ethics enables Tharoor to evaluate contemporary political life without reducing moral questions to sectarian or doctrinal concerns.

Lakshmi aptly observes that Tharoor's socio-moral vision is characterized by a profound concern for the decline of ethical values in contemporary society. She argues that the novel portrays a process of "transvaluation of values" in which traditional moral principles have gradually been displaced by opportunism, political expediency, and material ambition (Lakshmi 08).

The Mahabharata framework thus becomes an ethical standard against which the failures of postcolonial India are measured. Satire, irony, and mythological parallelism function not merely as literary devices but as instruments of moral inquiry. The erosion of dharma ultimately produces wider social consequences that extend beyond political corruption.

Tharoor demonstrates that the weakening of ethical responsibility contributes to communal prejudice, social discrimination, and the distortion of historical memory. In particular, the novel criticizes attempts to marginalize Indian Muslims by questioning their contribution to the freedom struggle and by encouraging sectarian interpretations of national history. Such narratives undermine the secular ideals upon which modern India was founded and threaten the pluralistic character of Indian society.

For Tharoor, secularism is not simply a constitutional principle but a moral necessity for sustaining national unity within a culturally diverse society. His critique of communalism therefore reflects a broader commitment to tolerance, inclusivity, and democratic coexistence. The novel consistently rejects ideological extremism and advocates a conception of national identity grounded in justice, plurality, and mutual respect.

In conclusion, *The Great Indian Novel* presents a comprehensive socio-moral critique of postcolonial India by reinterpreting the ethical philosophy of the Mahabharata within a modern political context. Through the symbolic framework of dharma, Tharoor exposes the moral contradictions underlying corruption, developmental inequality, educational disparity, communal prejudice, and political opportunism.

His satire does not merely ridicule the failures of contemporary society; it also reaffirms the enduring relevance of ethical responsibility as the foundation of democratic governance and social harmony. Consequently, the novel remains a significant work of postcolonial literature that challenges readers to reconsider the relationship between morality, history, and nation-building in contemporary India.

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