

The Influence of Mythology in the Writings of Shashi Tharoor

Dr. Jitendra Deo Dhaka

Assistant Professor of English
Government Arts College, Sikar (Rajasthan)

Abstract

This paper explores the profound influence of Indian mythology, particularly the Mahabharata, on the literary works of Shashi Tharoor. As a contemporary Indian writer, Tharoor has frequently drawn on mythological themes, reimagining them to explore modern-day socio-political and cultural dynamics. Using *The Great Indian Novel* as the central case study, the paper delves into the manner in which Tharoor integrates mythological structures, characters, and archetypes into his narratives. By positioning mythology not only as a literary device but as a means of critiquing political ideologies, social structures, and historical narratives, Tharoor demonstrates the continued relevance of ancient myth in contemporary discourse. This study also highlights how Tharoor uses satire, allegory, and parody to draw connections between the mythological past and the complex realities of modern India, providing a unique insight into his literary innovation.

Keywords: Shashi Tharoor, Mythology, Mahabharata, Satire, Allegory, Indian Literature, Postmodernism, Political Critique, Contemporary India

1. Introduction

The fusion of myth and modern literature has often yielded fascinating results, offering a platform for authors to explore deep-seated cultural traditions while addressing contemporary issues. **Shashi Tharoor**, one of India's most renowned contemporary authors, leverages this fusion through his works that consistently intertwine mythology, politics, and historical narratives. Tharoor's literary style is characterized by his keen engagement with the Indian past and present, particularly the ways in which mythological stories — specifically the Mahabharata — can illuminate the complexities of modern Indian society.

Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) stands as his magnum opus in this regard, where he reinterprets the Mahabharata against the backdrop of 20th-century Indian politics. By drawing parallels between the

ancient epic and India's struggle for independence, the post-colonial transition, and its political turbulence, Tharoor builds a narrative that is both a historical and mythological commentary on the nation's socio-political evolution.

This paper seeks to explore the influence of Indian mythology on Shashi Tharoor's writing, specifically focusing on how he uses mythological references to critique modern Indian politics and society. The paper will analyze how Tharoor's approach to myth differs from traditional uses in literature and how he crafts a literary space that transcends time by merging myth with history.

2. Theoretical Framework: Myth and Literature

Mythology plays a significant role in literature, serving not only as a reservoir of ancient stories but also as a lens through which authors reinterpret contemporary issues. According to **Northrop Frye** (1957), mythology in literature serves as a "lens" for examining the human experience through symbolic, allegorical, and often universal narratives. In postcolonial contexts, such as India, myth takes on an additional dimension, where it becomes both a tool for cultural expression and a medium through which authors can negotiate their relationship with colonial and modern influences.

In this framework, **myth** can serve several purposes:

- **Cultural Continuity:** Mythological narratives are a part of a shared cultural memory that provides a bridge between the past and present, maintaining the continuity of cultural identity.
- **Allegory and Symbolism:** In literature, myth serves as an allegorical tool to convey deeper philosophical, moral, and political meanings, often critiquing societal norms and human nature.
- **Critique of History:** Mythological narratives, when placed in a historical context, can be used to challenge conventional historical accounts and provide a counter-narrative that reexamines historical events and figures through a symbolic lens.

Tharoor, drawing heavily from **Indian mythology**, particularly the Mahabharata, employs these frameworks in his writing. The epic, which has shaped Indian culture for millennia, serves as a source of symbols, archetypes, and metaphors, which Tharoor adapts to comment on India's post-independence political struggles, historical conflicts, and national identity.

3. Shashi Tharoor's Literary Vision and Mythology

3.1 Tharoor's Approach to Myth

Shashi Tharoor's works often reflect his deep understanding of Indian mythology. However, unlike conventional retellings of myths, his approach is **postmodern**, wherein myth is not presented as absolute or sacred but rather as **fluid, open to interpretation, and ripe for critique**. Tharoor's characters, particularly in *The Great Indian Novel*, are imbued with the moral complexities of mythological figures but are placed within the framework of modern, often cynical, Indian politics.

Tharoor's works, especially in his non-fiction, also highlight his belief that Indian mythology and history must be reinterpreted for contemporary society. He frequently discusses the **relevance of ancient myths in modern contexts** and questions the rigid boundaries that have been established between mythology, history, and reality.

3.2 Modern Indian Identity through Mythology

Tharoor's re-imagining of mythic figures allows him to comment on **modern Indian identity**. The characters in *The Great Indian Novel* — like Bhishma, Duryodhana, and Karna — are modeled after the iconic figures of the Mahabharata, yet they are viewed through the lens of post-colonial India. For instance, in Tharoor's narrative, **Mahatma Gandhi** is portrayed as a modern version of Bhishma, the epitome of idealism and moral authority, but also deeply flawed in his inability to navigate political realities. Similarly, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India, is symbolically linked with Yudhishtira, embodying leadership yet continually questioning the principles that guide him.

Tharoor's characters reflect a **cynical view of politics**, showing how the ideals that these mythological figures represent often clash with the harsh realities of governance. This juxtaposition offers a critique of India's political evolution after independence, highlighting the dissonance between the dream of a perfect nation and the compromises made by its leaders.

4. Mythology in The Great Indian Novel

4.1 Structural Recasting of the Mahabharata

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor reimagines the Mahabharata as a **metaphor for India's political journey**, blending mythological events with historical realities. The story of the Mahabharata is transposed onto 20th-century India, with the country's struggle for independence and subsequent partition as the backdrop. Tharoor structures the novel in a way that parallels the **Kurukshetra war** with the political battles that defined modern India.

In this retelling, Tharoor does not merely retell the epic; instead, he **recasts history**. His characters are based on real historical figures but are given mythological traits. For instance, the novel's protagonist, Shaurya, is an allegorical counterpart to the Mahabharata's Arjuna, representing the moral dilemmas faced by modern-day Indian leaders.

4.2 Allegory and Satire: A Critique of Indian Politics

Tharoor's use of mythological references goes beyond mere allusion to create a **deeply satirical narrative**. By positioning Indian politicians in mythological roles, Tharoor critiques the **moral and ethical shortcomings** of his characters. For example, in the figure of **Indira Gandhi** (represented as Durga), Tharoor illustrates the paradox of power and idealism that marked her leadership.

Tharoor's narrative **sardonically critiques the political figures** who shaped India's post-colonial destiny, drawing out the inconsistencies between their public personas and private lives. This **ironic engagement** with myth allows Tharoor to deconstruct the **heroic myth of the Indian freedom struggle**, showcasing the human flaws and moral compromises behind the creation of the modern Indian state.

5. Broader Literary and Political Implications

5.1 Impact on Indian Literature

Tharoor's work has influenced **postcolonial Indian literature**, particularly in the way myth and history are interwoven to create new literary forms. Through works like *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor challenges traditional forms of historical writing, offering a **narrative that is non-linear**, non-chronological, and non-factual, but deeply emotional and political. The mythological intertext in Tharoor's fiction reflects a **literary rebellion** against Western literary canons and offers an indigenous voice to **reclaim historical and cultural narratives**.

5.2 Postmodernism and Myth

Tharoor's re-imagining of myth serves as a postmodern tool to interrogate not just the **past** but also **the present**. By using myth as a lens through which to view modernity, he engages with **postmodernism** to question the **concept of historical truth** and the **fluidity of identity**. Tharoor's works invite readers to reconsider the meaning of myth in the modern world and reflect on its ability to comment on **contemporary issues** such as nationalism, secularism, and identity.

6. Conclusion

Shashi Tharoor's engagement with mythology is not merely an aesthetic choice; it is a **strategic literary device** that allows him to critique and explore the complex socio-political fabric of modern India. By using the ancient epics, especially the Mahabharata, as both **literary structure** and **metaphor**, Tharoor provides readers with a unique framework for understanding contemporary Indian identity. Through allegory, satire, and parody, he forces a reexamination of both the **past and present**, making mythology a potent force for **political and social critique**.

Tharoor's works, particularly *The Great Indian Novel*, offer a rich tapestry of myth, history, and politics that speaks to the **complexity of post-colonial India**. Through his artful blending of mythological narrative and historical reality, Tharoor breathes new life into age-old tales, making them relevant to the modern world while offering a powerful critique of contemporary political and social issues.

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