Treatment of Nationalism in Shashi Tharoor's *the Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract
This paper explores the multifaceted treatment of nationalism in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, a satirical reimagining of the Indian independence movement through the allegorical framework of the Mahabharata. Tharoor employs parody, myth, and political allegory to interrogate the evolution of Indian nationalism from the colonial period to the post-independence era. The novel critiques both the idealism of early nationalist leaders and the disillusionment that followed in the wake of partition and political opportunism. Through characters modeled on historical figures, Tharoor exposes the contradictions and complexities inherent in nationalist discourse—juxtaposing Gandhian moralism with Nehruvian modernity and later political cynicism. The paper argues that Tharoor's depiction of nationalism is neither celebratory nor dismissive but rather a nuanced reflection on its role in shaping India's identity. By blending history and myth, The Great Indian Novel challenges monolithic narratives and invites readers to reconsider the ideological underpinnings of nationalism in modern India.

Keywords: patriotism, nationalism, politics, history, retelling, modernity, cynicism, myth

Introduction
Nationalism has long served as both a unifying and divisive force in the socio-political landscape of India. The struggle for independence from British colonial rule was driven by a powerful nationalist movement, which evolved through various ideological phases—from Gandhian non-violence to Nehruvian secularism and beyond. In the decades following independence, however, Indian nationalism underwent significant transformation, often marked by political opportunism, sectarianism, and disillusionment. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* offers a sharp and witty critique of this evolution by reimagining India's political history through the lens of the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.
Blending mythology, historical fact, and political satire, Tharoor constructs a parallel narrative where key figures of the Indian independence movement and postcolonial politics are recast as characters from the epic. Through this allegorical technique, the novel becomes a powerful commentary on the nature of Indian nationalism—its aspirations, contradictions, and failures. Tharoor does not merely retell history; he interrogates it, exposing how nationalist ideals have been reinterpreted, manipulated, or betrayed over time. This paper examines how *The Great Indian Novel* addresses nationalism as a dynamic and contested concept, reflecting both the hopes and the disillusionments of a nation in transition.

Shashi Tharoor as a Novelist
Shashi Tharoor occupies a unique space in contemporary Indian English literature, blending his background as a diplomat, historian, and politician with his literary pursuits. As a novelist, Tharoor is best known for his sharp wit, postcolonial critique, and sophisticated interweaving of myth, history, and satire. His fiction often reflects a deep engagement with India's colonial past and post-independence identity, using innovative narrative structures and intertextual references to explore complex political and cultural themes.
Tharoor's novels, particularly *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), *Riot: A Love Story* (2001), and *Show Business* (1992), demonstrate his flair for blending genres—myth, metafiction, political commentary, and dark humor. In *The Great Indian Novel*, he reimagines the Mahabharata as a political allegory of modern Indian history, showcasing his inventive literary style and postmodern sensibility. Dharwal's *Nationalism among the native Writers* highlights "We Indians, Arjun, are so good at respecting outward forms while ignoring the substance. We took the forms of parliamentary democracy… But we ignored the basic fact… neither condition [responsiveness or qualified legislators]… fulfilled in India for long." (45-46).His prose is rich, layered, and often ironic, appealing to readers familiar with both Indian mythology and the country's tumultuous political history.
As a novelist, Tharoor brings an insider-outsider perspective, having spent much of his life in international diplomacy and global forums. This vantage point allows him to comment on Indian politics and society with both intimacy and

critical distance. His novels are not just narratives; they are intellectual engagements with the idea of India—its nationalism, pluralism, and contradictions.

Epic as a Source of Literature

Epics have long served as foundational texts in the literary traditions of many cultures, offering not only grand narratives of heroism and morality but also insights into societal values, political ideologies, and cultural identities. As extended narrative poems that often recount the exploits of legendary figures and gods, epics such as the *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Iliad*, and *Odyssey* function as both historical and mythological repositories. Their timeless themes—conflict, duty, sacrifice, and destiny—provide fertile ground for reinterpretation across literary genres and eras.

In Indian literature, the *Mahabharata* in particular holds a unique place, not only as a religious and philosophical text but also as a rich source of narrative structure, character archetypes, and moral inquiry. Modern writers frequently turn to epic literature to draw parallels between the mythic past and contemporary realities. This intertextual relationship allows them to explore present-day issues—such as nationalism, political corruption, and identity crises—within a familiar and culturally resonant framework.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* exemplifies this tradition of epic as a literary source. By recasting the *Mahabharata* in the context of 20th-century Indian political history, Tharoor underscores the continuing relevance of epic narratives in shaping modern discourse. His use of epic form not only enriches the literary texture of the novel but also elevates the political events of modern India to a mythic dimension, inviting readers to view contemporary history through the moral and philosophical lens of ancient tradition.

Mahabharata as a Source of *The Great Indian Novel*

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* draws extensively from the ancient Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, using it as both a structural and thematic foundation to reinterpret modern Indian political history. Tharoor cleverly reimagines the epic's characters, events, and moral conflicts to parallel the Indian freedom movement and the subsequent evolution of the Indian republic.This intertextual strategy allows him to explore the continuity between myth and reality, history and narrative, while offering a satirical critique of India's political landscape.

The *Mahabharata*, with its complex web of familial loyalties, moral dilemmas, and dharmic tensions, provides a rich framework through which Tharoor narrates 20th-century Indian events—from colonial resistance to post-independence disillusionment. For instance, the character of Dhritarashtra is modeled on Jawaharlal Nehru, while Gandhi appears as a modern-day Bhishma in the form of the ascetic Gangaji. The epic's Kurukshetra war is reimagined through the lens of India's partition and political rivalries, casting familiar political figures in the roles of epic heroes and villains.

By using the *Mahabharata* as a source, Tharoor not only anchors his narrative in a culturally resonant tradition but also questions the moral absolutism often associated with nationalist histories. His adaptation is not a mere retelling but a bold reworking that juxtaposes the grandeur of epic with the ambiguities of modern politics. This synthesis of myth and history creates a powerful literary device through which the ideals and contradictions of Indian nationalism are examined and deconstructed.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a masterful fusion of mythology and history, wherein the *Mahabharata*—one of India's oldest and most revered epics—serves as the structural and thematic backbone for a satirical retelling of modern Indian political history. The title itself is a play on both the grandeur of the Indian epic tradition and the Western literary idea of the "Great American Novel," signalling Tharoor's intention to reinterpret Indian nationhood through indigenous narrative forms.

The *Mahabharata*, composed over centuries and attributed to sage Vyasa, is not only a story of dynastic struggle but also a philosophical text that explores dharma (duty), karma (action), and the moral ambiguity of war. Tharoor appropriates this epic narrative framework and overlays it with events from the Indian freedom struggle, partition, and post-independence politics. Each major character and event in the novel has a parallel in the epic, serving as a satirical mirror to India's political journey.

For example,

- **Dhritarashtra**, the blind king of Hastinapur in the *Mahabharata*, is transformed into a symbol of Nehruvian idealism and political blindness. Tharoor's Dhritarashtra is unable to 'see' the consequences of his decisions, much like how critics view Jawaharlal Nehru's utopian vision of secularism and socialism.
- **Bhishma**, the grand patriarch who takes a vow of celibacy and loyalty to the throne, is reimagined as **Gangaji**, a clear allegory for Mahatma Gandhi. Like Bhishma, Gangaji is morally revered but politically problematic—his idealism often paralyzes decision-making and enables others to manipulate power.
- **Pandavas and Kauravas**, the central warring factions of the *Mahabharata*, become representations of different political ideologies and parties within the freedom movement and post-independence India. Yudhishtir is recast as **Devraj**, a morally upright but indecisive leader, while **Karna** emerges as a tragic figure symbolizing marginalized brilliance, echoing real-life leaders like Subhas Chandra Bose.

Tharoor does not simply retell the *Mahabharata*; he reshapes it to expose the continuities between myth and modern politics. The *Kurukshetra* war, emblematic of the battle for dharma, is juxtaposed with the struggle for Indian independence and the ideological warfare that followed. Through this literary device, Tharoor blurs the line between epic heroism and political opportunism, turning revered history into fertile ground for satire.

Moreover, the character of **Ved Vyas**, the original author of the *Mahabharata*, is given metafictional importance in the novel.

Tharoor's use of the *Mahabharata* allows him to:

1. **Engage cultural memory**: By invoking a text every Indian is culturally familiar with, he invites readers to reevaluate history through the lens of epic wisdom and mythic resonance.
2. **Critique nationalism**: By drawing parallels between mythic heroism and modern political failures, he questions the purity and purpose of nationalist narratives.
3. **Explore moral ambiguity**: Like the epic itself, the novel presents no absolute heroes or villains, highlighting the complex ethical terrain of leadership, power, and legacy.

In sum, the *Mahabharata* is not merely a source but a living framework in *The Great Indian Novel*. It enables Tharoor to construct a layered narrative that satirizes, reinterprets, and ultimately challenges the dominant myths of Indian nationalism and democracy. By aligning the sacred past with the secular present, Tharoor revitalizes the epic form to interrogate the foundations of India's political identity.

The Great Indian Novel as a Political Satire

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* stands as a remarkable example of political satire in contemporary Indian English literature. By reimagining India's modern political history through the mythological framework of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor constructs a satirical narrative that critiques the ideals, contradictions, and failings of the Indian political system. The novel is not simply a retelling of historical events; it is a bold, ironic, and often irreverent commentary on the transformation of Indian nationalism, the moral bankruptcy of its political elite, and the myth-making tendencies of postcolonial history.

Satire, by definition, uses humor, irony, exaggeration, or ridicule to expose and criticize prevailing social and political realities. Tharoor's novel employs all these techniques in abundance. He transforms revered political leaders into flawed epic characters, exposing their weaknesses, hypocrisies, and blind spots. For instance:

- **Gangaji**, modeled on Mahatma Gandhi, is portrayed with deep reverence but also with an undercurrent of irony. His obsession with celibacy, his impractical idealism, and his manipulative hold over the masses are gently mocked, suggesting that even the most venerated figures are not above critique.
- **Dhritarashtra**, the blind king symbolizing Nehru, is blind not only in the literal sense but also metaphorically representing Nehru's inability to foresee the consequences of his policies, particularly regarding partition, Kashmir, and dynastic politics.
- The **Emergency period**, depicted through the character of **Priya Duryodhani** (an allusion to Indira Gandhi), is sharply critiqued for authoritarianism, media censorship, and democratic erosion. Tharoor satirizes the consolidation of power and the cult of personality that grew around Indira, presenting it as a deviation from the democratic ideals of the freedom struggle.

Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel starts with the Menippean Satire verse, which has brought the fairness to the original work Mahabharata: Raja Gopalachari and P. Lal states

What follows is the tale of Vyasa,
Great Vyasa, deserver of respect;
A tale told and retold,
The people who never cease telling;
A source of wisdom,
In the sky, the earth, and the lower worlds,
A tale twice – born know;
A tale for the learned,
Skillful in style varied in metres,
Devoted to dialogue human and divine

<center>(The Mahabharata of Vyasa)</center>

This verse serves as an invocation to Tharoor's writing. Tharoor himself is no scholar of Sanskrit. He solely depends on P. Lal's and Raja Gopalachari's translation. This verse itself encapsulates the entire story of the Mahabharata
In doing so, Tharoor challenges the official narratives of Indian nationalism, which often glorify the freedom movement and present post-independence India as the fulfillment of a righteous struggle. By juxtaposing myth and modernity,

reverence and ridicule, Tharoor undermines these hagiographies and invites readers to adopt a more critical and nuanced understanding of India's past and present.

Ultimately, *The Great Indian Novel* is not merely a satire for entertainment; it is a politically engaged work that uses humor as a form of resistance. Tharoor's approach reflects the belief that literature has a vital role in questioning authority, exposing hypocrisy, and imagining alternative narratives. Through its sharp wit and literary innovation, the novel contributes meaningfully to the tradition of political satire while also redefining how Indian history can be remembered and retold.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is a seminal work of political satire that cleverly intertwines Indian mythology with twentieth-century political history. By retelling the epic of the *Mahabharata* in the context of India's freedom struggle and post-independence politics, Tharoor creates a literary space where myth and history intersect to critique the rise, fall, and flaws of Indian political leadership.

Satire in the novel is achieved through parody, irony, and the reimagining of historical figures as mythic characters. As Tharoor states in his Author's Note:

"If you do not like the version, you find here, go out and write your own. That, after all, is how the Mahabharata came to be written" (*The Great Indian Novel* xi).

This declaration frames the novel as a self-aware act of revision, inviting readers to interrogate historical narratives and question political mythology.

Tharoor recasts **Mahatma Gandhi** as **Gangaji**, an ascetic and morally rigid figure modeled on **Bhishma**. While respectful, the portrayal subtly critiques Gandhi's political methods and their unintended consequences. For example, Gangaji insists:

"To suffer is to be cleansed. To be beaten is to earn moral authority" (Tharoor 58), mocking the romanticization of suffering in nationalist discourse. The satire here does not merely target Gandhi but the culture of moral absolutism that can hinder pragmatic politics.

Jawaharlal Nehru, the architect of modern India, in his speech "Tryst with destiny" becomes **Dhritarashtra**, the blind king. Tharoor satirizes Nehru's idealism as political blindness, especially regarding his inability to prevent partition and the concentration of power. Dhritarashtra reflects "Power always comes with a price, and I chose not to see what it cost me" (www.nehru's speech.org) underscoring the dangers of utopian leadership disconnected from ground realities.

The novel is especially biting in its depiction of **Indira Gandhi**, presented as **Priya Duryodhani**. Her character embodies authoritarianism and dynastic ambition. During the Emergency, Duryodhani declares:

"Democracy is not a convenience—it is a nuisance" (TGIN318), a sharp indictment of her suppression of civil liberties and press freedom during the actual Emergency (1975–77).

Literary critics have recognized Tharoor's novel as a work of incisive political satire. According to Meenakshi Mukherjee's *Perishable Empire*, says "Tharoor's satire is not only literary but also historical—it mocks the self-righteousness of nationalist memory while reasserting the power of storytelling" (91).

In using satire to deconstruct political history, *The Great Indian Novel* transcends mere parody. It reflects on the **moral ambiguity** of political figures and the **myth-making tendencies** of the postcolonial state. Tharoor's use of irony forces readers to confront uncomfortable truths about the Indian nation-state: that its founding ideals have often been compromised by personal ambition, authoritarianism, and populist rhetoric.

Thus, the novel serves both as a tribute to and a critique of Indian democracy. As Tharoor blends ancient myth with contemporary history, he shows how political narratives—like epics—are shaped by those in power and must be constantly reexamined. In doing so, *The Great Indian Novel* affirms the role of satire as a tool of political resistance and literary intervention.

Socio-Political Issues in *The Great Indian Novel*

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* offers a panoramic critique of the socio-political landscape of twentieth-century India by weaving together mythology and history. Through its allegorical retelling of the *Mahabharata*, the novel explores a broad range of socio-political issues, including nationalism, communalism, caste dynamics, partition, political corruption, and the challenges of democracy. Tharoor's narrative highlights the complexities and contradictions of India's struggle for identity, unity, and justice.

1. Nationalism and Its Contradictions

The novel foregrounds the evolution of Indian nationalism, tracing its idealistic beginnings and the eventual disillusionment with political leadership. Tharoor satirizes the moral absolutism often associated with nationalist leaders. Gangaji's (Gandhi's) belief in non-violence and moral purity is contrasted with the brutal realities of political struggle. Gangaji famously asserts, "To suffer is to be cleansed. To be beaten is to earn moral authority" (TGIN 58),exposing how nationalist discourse sometimes romanticizes suffering while sidelining pragmatic concerns. The novel questions whether nationalism is a unifying ideal or a divisive force.

2. Communalism and Partition

One of the most profound socio-political issues addressed in the novel is the communal violence leading to the partition of India and Pakistan. The narrative uses the *Mahabharata*'s fratricidal war to allegorize the bloody conflict between religious communities. Tharoor starkly critiques the political manipulation that fueled hatred and division, writing:"The poison that divided us was brewed in the cauldrons of political ambition and religious fanaticism" (TGIN 167).

These highlights how communalism was not just an inevitable social phenomenon but a politically engineered tragedy, reflecting the real-life failures of leaders to safeguard pluralism.

3. Political Corruption and Dynastic Politics

Tharoor critiques the rise of political opportunism and corruption in post-independence India. The character of Dhritarashtra (Nehru) is idealistic but also blind to the emerging flaws in the new nation's polity. The novel vividly portrays the Emergency (1975-77) through the character of Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi), highlighting authoritarianism and the erosion of democratic values. Priya Duryodhani's declaration,"Democracy is not a convenience—it is a nuisance" (TGIN318),encapsulates the cynicism and abuse of power that defined this period. The narrative exposes how dynastic politics and centralized authority undermined India's democratic institutions.

4. Challenges of Democracy and Governance

The novel reflects on the difficulties of sustaining democracy in a vast and diverse country like India. It questions the effectiveness of leadership and the role of the citizenry in political processes. The metaphor of the epic war reflects the ongoing ideological battles between idealism and realpolitik. Tharoor's Ved Vyas-narrator remarks,
"Democracy is an endless battlefield where every warrior thinks himself a hero" (Tharoor 350), underscoring the messy, contested nature of governance in India.

Through its intricate allegory and sharp wit, *The Great Indian Novel* interrogates the socio-political challenges that have shaped modern India. Tharoor's narrative underscores that India's political history is marked by high ideals entangled with deep contradictions—between unity and division, morality and expediency, democracy and authoritarianism. By using the *Mahabharata* as a lens, the novel elevates these issues into a mythic dimension, urging readers to reflect on the ongoing struggles that define Indian society.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a brilliant example of how literature can bridge the **mythical past** and **political present**. By using the *Mahabharata* as an allegorical framework, Tharoor weaves together **India's ancient cultural identity** with the **modern political landscape**, turning mythology into a satirical mirror of post-independence India.

Tharoor Connecting the Past to the Present with the lens of Mahabharata Epic
1. Characters from the Mahabharata as Modern Political Figures

Tharoor repurposes epic figures to represent iconic leaders and events from Indian history:

- **Dhritarashtra** (blind king) = **Jawaharlal Nehru** (idealistic but blind to realpolitik)
- **Bhishma** = **Mohandas Gandhi**, embodying moral authority but political impracticality
- **Draupadi (Draupadi Mokrasi)** = **Indian democracy**, humiliated during the Emergency
- **Priya Duryodhani** = **Indira Gandhi**, echoing Duryodhana's authoritarian tendencies

This mapping allows Tharoor to critique contemporary leaders using the moral language and structure of the epic.

2. Parallel Events in Myth and Modern History

Tharoor aligns key historical moments with epic milestones:

- **Partition and independence** = The splitting of the kingdom
- **Emergency (1975–77)** = Draupadi's disrobing, symbolizing the assault on democracy
- **Nehruvian socialism** = Seen through the Pandavas' flawed yet idealistic rule
- **Dynastic politics** = Mirrored in the Kaurava-Pandava conflict

By showing that the moral ambiguities and power struggles of the *Mahabharata* continue in modern India, Tharoor argues that Indian politics is a cyclical epic in itself.

3. Satirical Use of Mythological Tone

- The *Mahabharata* is known for its **moral grayness** and **epic scale**, which Tharoor mimics in tone and narrative.
- He uses **mythic grandeur** to ironically highlight the **pettiness of real-world politics**.
- The narration is often self-aware, mocking both the epic form and the political myths of nationalism.

4. Cultural Continuity and Irony

- Tharoor suggests that Indian identity is deeply rooted in myth, but these myths are **selectively interpreted** by politicians to suit their agendas.

• He uses this blend to question: *Has India truly evolved, or is it just replaying the same battles in new forms?*

Through *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor doesn't just retell the *Mahabharata*—he reclaims it as a **political and cultural lens**. The past and present collide, showing that mythology isn't just a tale from ancient times but a **living narrative** shaping modern India. His satire highlights how **the epic's moral complexities and power dynamics remain eerily relevant**, revealing the cyclical nature of Indian politics.

Tharoor's Connection of National and Regional Harmony in *The Great Indian Novel*
1. India's Diversity and Regional Identities
Tharoor portrays India as a vast land of many kingdoms, languages, and cultures—mirroring the real-life regional diversity of the country. In the novel, this is symbolized by the many kingdoms of the *Mahabharata* and the political tensions among them, reflecting India's own mosaic of regional identities. "India was a tapestry woven from countless threads — languages, castes, religions, provinces — each demanding recognition, each asserting its own pride and identity." (TGIN 367). This highlights that India's unity is not about erasing differences but about integrating diverse voices.

2. The Pandavas' Quest for Unity
The Pandavas represent leaders striving for a cohesive India, attempting to reconcile regional differences within a broader national framework. Their struggle for legitimacy and justice symbolizes the challenge of forging national unity amidst diversity.

3. Draupadi Mokrasi as a Symbol of Democratic Unity
Draupadi, renamed Draupadi Mokrasi in the novel, personifies Indian democracy—a political system designed to represent and harmonize India's many regions and communities. Her treatment during the Emergency (an episode in Indian history when democratic rights were suspended) allegorizes the fragility of national unity.

"Draupadi Mokrasi was the embodiment of the Indian nation's promise — a unity not imposed but chosen, a harmony not forced but nurtured through participation."(TGIN 416)
This shows how democracy is the mechanism through which regional and national identities coexist.

Conclusion
In *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor offers a rich, ironic, and critical reimagining of Indian nationalism through the lens of myth and modern politics. His treatment of nationalism is both reverent and subversive—he respects the ideals of the freedom movement but exposes how those ideals were later compromised by ambition, authoritarianism, and dynastic politics.
Tharoor presents nationalism not as a monolithic, sacred force, but as a complex, evolving, and often manipulated ideology. By using the *Mahabharata* as an allegorical framework, he emphasizes that Indian nationalism was initially built on shared ideals of justice, unity in diversity, and sacrifice—embodied in characters like Gangaji (Gandhi) and the Pandavas. However, he also illustrates how these ideals were later undermined by the rise of centralized power, the Emergency, and the distortion of democracy—symbolized through Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) and the disrobing of Draupadi Mokrasi (Indian democracy).
Ultimately, Tharoor's satire critiques the decline of ethical nationalism and warns against the dangers of mythologizing political leaders. His message is clear: for Indian nationalism to endure meaningfully, it must return to its foundational values—tolerance, pluralism, and justice—not just rely on the emotional power of myth or the cult of leadership. Nationalism, in Tharoor's view, should be a living commitment to democratic principles, not a convenient tool for political gain.
Note: In this Research Paper Quotations taken from The Great Indian Novel as indicated (TGIN)

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