

Shashi Tharoor's Vision of Multicultural India

First Author

*Dr.K.K.Sunalini*¹

Associate Professor, Department of English

Koneru Lakshmaiah Education Foundation

Guntur, Andhra Pradesh, India 522502

Email: sunalini12.klu@kluniversity.in

Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9090-3753>

Second Author

Dr.Jagan Mohan Rao

Assistant Professor, Department of English

Shaqra University, Saudi Arabia

Email: jmohan@su.edu.sa

Orcid id: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5458-7458>

Abstract - Homi K Bhabha has crystallized a new agenda for the concepts of a nation. According to him the idea of a nation has emerged from the political and literary traditions which has its roots in the myths. 'Nation' as a concept has emerged in shaping the postcolonial discourse. Shashi Tharoor became an aspiring voice as he highlights the plurality and diversity of a nation in his fiction, speeches, and social media. According to him "Many observers have been astonished by India's survival as a pluralist state [...] Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India's geography and reaffirmed by its history"(Tharoor 2013 9). Tharoor's addressing the students at Jawaharlal Nehru University on 20thMarch 2016 was supported by historical anecdotes and personal experiences referring to the importance of cultural tolerance and diversity. He asserted the youth to understand how minorities were treated with grace and honor in India and what makes the people around the world following different religions find India a safest place on the earth. According to him Indian nationalism is based on the ancient civilization which is a shared history and sustained by a pluralistic democracy. The present paper intends to discuss the concept of nation and nationalism in the select novels of Shashi Tharoor.

Key words: crystallized, astonished, pluralism, minorities, nationalism

I. INTRODUCTION

After the World war II, many new nations were formed and thus postcolonial literature came into existence. The postcolonial writers revived the glorious past history of India. Unity in diversity is its note worthy feature. Shashi Tharoor's novels and short stories are the reflection of Indian history and culture. He highlights the concept of multiculturalism in India. In his words, "Many observers have been astonished by India's survival as a pluralist state" (Tharoor 2013 9).

2. MULTICULTURALISM

Indian culture is shaped by the amalgamation of different religions. In Tharoor's opinion, Hindu is the word used by the foreigners. In his *India, From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*, he affirms that it is the will of the people that brings unity among them. India survives as a democratic nation for the only reason that the people share a common political will. In his *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone: Reflections on India in the Twenty-First Century*, Tharoor speaks about the hybrid culture of India. He states that "The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in plural" (Tharoor, 2007 56). He points out that Hinduism is the religion of majority of the people in India. To the question what makes India a nation, he aptly says that India is not all about language, ethnicity, religion, politics or culture but it is the plurality of the nation. To explain this aspect he cites the example of South Indian *Thali* which is a combination of rice, chapatti and many other varieties of dishes arranged in the same plate. Further he illustrates the example of Manmohan Singh taking the oath as Prime Minister in the presence of Abdul kalam and Sonia Gandhi. This situation is a fine example of Hindu, Christian and Muslim representing a nation. In his *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor writes about the unending process of human evolution. In his words "India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again. India is forever; and India is forever being made" (Tharoor 1989 245). Tharoor takes the reference of the great epic *Mahabharatha* and compares the situation of contemporary India with it. The characters of the epic are brought in the light of modern India. The connectivity between the past and the present is found when Tharoor pictures Bhishma in the form of Mahatma Gandhi. This kind of narrative technique of replacing linear mode of historical narration with the cyclical mode resembles Homi. K. Bhabha's 'sly civility'. Tharoor's neutral nature in his writings of neither being rebellious nor condescending to the demands of the colonizer resembles the notion of civility proposed by Bhabha. The novel extends from the entry of Gandhi into politics till the elections to the Indian Parliament. The story is narrated by Ved Vyas. Apart from the important characters of Mahabharatha, the Kauravas represent the Indian National Congress and the Pandavas represent the People's Front ie., Janata Party. Tharoor's narrative technique of showcasing mythological characters to the contemporary politics is to make the characters relive in the immediate present. He seems to drive the point that history repeats not only through incidents but also through characters. The novel, *Riot* raises three important questions on political, religious and personal ones. Political question is related to capitalism, religious question on Hinduism, personal question of Geetha or Priscilla. The other side of the novel mirrors the pathetic condition of Indian women. India as a nation provides various themes for his works. The past becomes an inevitable present that relives to pave a novel meaning to the present existence.

In the preface of *India from Midnight to Millennium and Beyond*, Shashi Tharoor quotes that Mahatma Gandhi describes India as a "house with all the doors and windows open through which the winds from around the world would blow, without sweeping Indians off their feet" (xviii). Tharoor illustrates that the Indian nationalism emerges from ancient civilization. It is an amalgamation of Hindu tradition, myth, scripture. Indian civilization is also influenced by Islam and Christianity. In India, all religions are privileged with equal status without any bias. Tharoor traces this unique sense of tradition to the term secularism as multiculturalism or plurality. In his words "The singular thing about India was that you could only speak of it in the plural. This pluralism emerged from the

very nature of the country” (Tharoor 2013 52). It is interesting to note the importance of the word ‘India’ It is the word used by foreigners. A set of theological beliefs predict that the word was intended for the people who lived beyond the river Sindhu or Indus. Subsequently, Hinduism is applied to the religion of India. Tharoor rightly points out that the Hindu religion does not claim itself to be the only true religion. “Hinduism, however, asserts that all ways of beliefs are equally valid, and Hindus readily venerate the saints, and the sacred objects, of other faiths” (Tharoor 2013 5).

Tharoor focuses on the operation of the national language ‘Hindi’ in various fields like politics and film industry. He cites the two examples namely, Deva Gowda’s oath taking as the Prime Minister and The veteran songster K.J.Jesudas. These two national personalities have become famous even without knowing Hindi language. In Tharoor’s words” [...] such an episode is almost inconceivable elsewhere, but it represents the best of the oddities that help make India India; the fact that the country can be ruled by a man who does not understand its ‘national language’ [...] One of Indian cinema’s finest playback singers the Keralite K.J.Jesudas, sung his way to the top of the Hindi charts with lyrics in that language written in Malayalam script for him to read, but to see the practice elevated to the prime ministerial address on the Independence Day was a startling affirmation of Indian pluralism. (Tharoor 2013 126).

Tharoor elevates the greatness of India’s hybrid culture in his *The Elephant, the Tiger and the Cellphone: Reflections on India in the Twenty-first Century*. Despite India’s illiteracy rate of 40 percent, it has educated world’s second largest pool of trained scientists and engineers. He expresses that no one can question its glory of culture which elevated non-violence to an effective moral principle. He further asserts that no one can question the ageless civilization that was the birthplace of four major religions, a dozen traditions of classical dance, eighty-five political parties and three hundred ways of cooking potato. In his words, “The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in plural” (Elephant). In his view, language, ethnicity and religion are also incomplete aspects to describe India’s pluralism which exceeds the countless barriers. The mindset of Indian citizens is tuned with various traditions, customs, religions, languages. The most important factor of influence is the British colonial rule. Tharoor observes that, “ Pluralism is a reality that emerges from the very nature of the country; it is a choice made inevitable by India’s geography and reaffirmed by its history” (Tharoor 2005 97).

Bookless in Baghdad, Tharoor’s non-fictional work discusses the philosophy behind the publication of his *The Great Indian Novel*. Indian epic the *Mahabharatha* has its cultural, mythological and historical identities of India. When the readers compare the two titles, they mean the great India. A critic rightly observes, “The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political history of modern India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the *Mahabharatha*” (Shah 2003 85). The novel is a political reflection of 20th century India. It is the retelling the mythological past in the present.

Though the novel *Riot* portrays the theme of love between IAS officer and a foreigner, the story is set against the backdrop of Ram Janmabhoomi-Babri Masjid issue. The novel reflects the conflicts between religions, cultures and

majorly the political parties. Shashi Tharoor did not confine himself to the *Riot* alone but also he expressed his opinions on Indian riots through media, journals, newspaper interviews and so on.

3. CONCLUSION

In an interview published in *The Hindu* entitled “An Adventure called India” Tharoor expresses the plurality of India as, “E Pluribus Pluribus Everything exists in countless variants. There is no single standard, no fixed stereotype, no ‘one way’ (Tharoor 2007). He strongly believes that Indian nationalism is not confined to a single language, ethnicity or religion but, “[...] emerging from an ancient civilization, united by a shared history, sustained by pluralist democracy (2007). He takes pride in reflecting the royal legacy and culture of India in his writings. He alerts that, “India should keep her doors and windows open so that the winds of the world can blow through our house, provided we are grounded solidly enough that we are not blown off our feet” (Tharoor 2015 205).

REFERENCES

- [1] Bhabha, Homi. K. “Sly Civility.” October.34. 34 (1985). Print.
- [2] Shah, Nila. *Novel as History*. New Delhi:Creative Books. 2003. Print.
- [3] Tharoor, Shashi. “An Adventure Called India.”Thehindu.com. The Hindu,5Aug 2007.Web. November 2020
- [4] ---, *Bookless in Baghdad: and Other Writings about Reading*. New Delhi: Penguin, 2005. Print.
- [5] ---, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium and Beyond*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2000. Print.
- [6] ---, *India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in Our Time*. New Delhi: Aleph Book Company. 2015. Print.
- [7] ---, *India: The Future is Now*. New Delhi: Wisdom Tree. 2013. Print.
- [8] ---, *Riot: A Novel*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2001. Print.
- [9] ---, *The Elephant, the Tiger, and the Cellphone: Reflections on India, the Emerging Twenty First Century Power*. New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2007. Print.
- [10] ---, *The Great Indian Novel*. NewDelhi: Penguin, 1989. Print.