

## **Exploration of Multi-cultural Concerns in the Novels of Shashi**

**Tharoor**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper is an attempt to study multi-cultural concerns in the novels of Shashi Tharoor as his novels are replete with socio-political, socio-cultural ideology and cultural clashes between the East and West culture. Tharoor deftly presents myriad cultures such as the *Mahabharata* culture, the celluloid culture, the political culture and the East-West culture with their issues throughout his fictional and non-fictional works. He finds impetus from the scriptures like the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Upanishad* and the *Bible*. His first highly acclaimed classic *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) brings out parallel study between characters of the *Mahabharata* and the Indian political leaders. *Show Business* (1992), his second novel satirizes the paradoxes in Bollywood film culture as well as it is a trenchant indictment of corruption in Indian public life. His third novel *Riot* (2001) traces the events of cultural activism and religious confrontation in the Indian scenario. It is a study of the East-West cultural clash against the backdrop of the communal disturbances. Tharoor's novels are based on Indian history, culture and politics. They are marked by some kind of multicultural concerns. On the basis of Tharoor's novels, a sincere attempt is made to explore multicultural concerns in multicultural India. All the three novels are cited to show Tharoor as a multiculturalist.

**Key words:** *multicultural, ideology, East-West culture, the Mahabharata, Bollywood, multiculturalist.*

**Introduction:**

A prolific author, politician, and former international diplomat, Shashi Tharoor straddles several worlds of experience. Currently a second-term Lok Sabha MP representing the Thiruvananthapuram constituency and Chairman of the Parliamentary Standing Committee on External Affairs, he has previously served as Minister of State for Human Resource Development and Minister of State for External Affairs in the Government of India. During his nearly three-decade long prior career at the United Nations, he served as a peacekeeper, refugee worker, and administrator at the highest levels, serving as Under-Secretary General during Kofi Annan's leadership of the organisation. Dr. Tharoor is an award-winning author of both fiction as well as non-fiction. In 1998, the World Economic Forum in Davos named him a "Global Leader of Tomorrow". He is also a recipient of several awards that include a Commonwealth Writers' Prize and the Pravasi Bharatiya Samman, India's highest honour for overseas nationals. In 2012, the King of Spain awarded him the Encomienda de la Real Order Espanola de Carlos III. Among numerous other awards are one for "New Age Politician of the Year" from NDTV, the Hakim Khan Sur Award for National Integration, and the Priyadarshini Award for Excellence in Diplomacy.

**Understanding Multiculturalism**

The term 'multiculturalism' generally refers to a state of racial, cultural and ethnic diversity within the demographics of a specified place. Multiculturalism aims at recognizing, celebrating and maintaining the different cultures or cultural identities within that society to promote social cohesion. In this context, multiculturalism advocates a society that extends equitable status to distinct cultural and religious groups, with no one culture predominating.

Multicultural ideologies or policies vary widely, ranging from the advocacy of equal to the various cultures in a society. People of various ethnic and religious groups are addressed by the authorities as defined by the group to which they belong. Multiculturalism has been described as a *salad bowl* or cultural mosaic and melting pot. The culture of India has been shaped by its long history, unique geography and diverse demography. India's languages, religions, dances, music, customs etc. differed by place to place within the country, but nevertheless possesses, commonality. The Indian society has been multi-cultural, multi-religious, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-linguistic from time immemorial. However, India has also encountered various kinds of divisiveness. Therefore, the biggest challenge before countries like India is to preserve the pluralistic tradition and to bring the various communities into the mainstream society by promoting the spirit of multiculturalism.

**Multicultural Concerns in *The Great Indian Novel***

Shashi Tharoor's first novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) brings out parallel study between characters of the Mahabharata and the Indian political leaders. It is a political satire. Tharoor incorporates remote history with the recent history of India. For him *Mahabharata* is the main source of inspiration to write this novel. It takes the story of the *Mahabharata*, the epic of Hindu Mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence Movement. It also figures out the first three decades of Post-Independence. The Indian history is transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian Independence and subsequent history through the 1980s.

*"The Great Indian Novel is a literary de force undermining the age old Indian complacency displayed in accepting everything ancient and anything foreign. It is a strange vision of contemporary Indian retold in the grab of the ancient tale of story-telling."* - Ayyapp Panikar

The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale describing the dynastic struggle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the heirs of the king Shantanu. Tharoor recasts the story of the nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related to personal and political histories. He takes an irreverent tone towards figures such as Mohandas Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru and Indira Gandhi.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Ved Vyas dictates his narration to Ganapathi, a young South Indian scribe sent by Ved Vyas's friend Brahma to transcribe the tale. Tharoor has described him as an original Ganesh the Elephant-headed Hindu God who wrote down Vyasa's amount of the *Mahabharata*. He has fictionalized two groups of Kaurava and Pandava parties. The Congress party as a Kaurava party, the villains led by Duryodhani, who usurps the Pandavas from the rule of Hastinapur - Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Nehru, and the third Prime Minister. Priya Duryodhani, the autocratic villain, daughter of Dhritarastra and the head of the Kaurava party appears as a fictionalized figure. She is in a changed sex and represents hundred Kauravas. She is known as only man in the entire parliament. Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, a law graduate and more an anglophile than Nehru who began his career as a colleague of Nehru and Gandhi in the Indian National Congress, fictionalized as Mohammad Ali Karna, son of Kunti and Hyperion Helios, the leader of the Muslims.

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Another elaboration of the epic original concerns the five Pandava themselves, as Tharoor moves to more direct allegory: Yudhistira stands for India's best political tradition, Bhim its loyal armed forces, Arjuna an articulate press, Nakul and Sahadeva the administrative and diplomatic services respectively. All five pandavas are also seen devoted to their common wife, Draupadi. She presents the "body politic" or Indian Democracy and wilts visibly with the imposition of Duryodhan's "siege" – a reference of Indira Gandhi's state in emergency from 1975 to 1977. Pandu, the non-biological father of the Pandavas, thus becomes Subhash Bose, founder of the pro-Japanese Indian National Army. Karna who is Kunti's child by the sun becomes Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the first president of Pakistan.

The epic *Mahabharata* has many archetypal characters which Tharoor explores with new satirical perspectives. The character of Ekalavya is very famous for his devotion towards learning and respect for his teacher. However, Tharoor satirizes this legendary character in his novel. In the original sacred text, Ekalavya learns the lessons from Guru Drona without the knowledge of the Guru. When Ekalavya excels in his field and emerges as a threat to Arjuna, Drona's favorite disciple and a prince, Guru Drona asks for the right thumb of Ekalavya as his fee for his lessons. While, in *The Great Indian Novel*, Ekalavya refuses to cut his thumb and give it to his teacher. Tharoor parodies this situation in which Guru Drona forces Ekalavya to cut his thumb but Ekalavya denies for the same. Far away from being the iconic ideal disciple, Ekalavya stands for the contemporary youth whose relationship with their teachers is more of a kind of business deal. Tharoor explores the legendary character more when he writes:

*Ekalavya stands his ground, but swallows, his dark face burning 'darker in his dismay.' 'I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot destroy my life and my mothers to pay your fee,' he says faintly and firmly. The boy steps back looks wildly around him, and trips hastily out of the room. (Tharoor, 1989, P.199)*

Thus, the archetypal figure of Ekalavya is parodied in this novel where Tharoor recreates these characters with his expert comical touch. By selecting the great epic *The Mahabharata*, he makes an audacious attempt to make parody of the traditional customs and traditions of ancient India. Through the great epic, he explores mythological characters with a new post-colonial perspective.

Tharoor mocks at everyone who wants to become powerful by deceiving and defeating their brothers and fellow men. The novel portrays how people long for power and how they misuse their power when they are bestowed with power. They feel themselves to be

omnipotent. He presents all the characters with wry humour and exhibits scant respect for the political leaders of independent India.

**Multicultural Concerns in *Show Business*:**

*Show Business* (1992) is a satirical exposure on the Bombay film industry. It not only satirizes the paradoxes in Bollywood film culture but also a trenchant indictment of corruption in Indian public life. The narrative follows the career of a famous film-star Ashok Banjara, from the period when the struggling actor tried to find a foothold in the film world to the time when he fought for survival after a fatal accident in a shooting zone. The character of Banjara is modeled on Amitabh Bachchan whose life closely parallels that of the fictional hero. This is made clear through the words:

*You're too tall; your legs are too long, your back is too straight, whatever. (SB P.17)*

Tharoor uses film, which he considers to be an important medium for transmitting fictional experience to the Indian masses, as a creative metaphor to explore the contemporary myths which are invented by the popular Hindi cinema and certain aspects of Indian life.

As an actor, Ashok Banjara comes across a beautiful girl named Maya who initially acts as a sister and later as his heroine. She also indulges in Ashok and shows liking for him and so Ashok exploits the situation by getting married with her. Soon, the married life proves unsuccessful. After marriage, he never encourages his wife in the film industry. He only expects her to be the Angel in house. Besides, a time comes when he gets a positive report of her pregnancy from the doctor, he is not so happy of becoming a father. However, he feels relieved that it will be a safe escape from his wife. Therefore, he leaves Maya to her fortune for delivery and indulges himself in a film shooting. It is clear by the fact that when Ashok gets fatherly advice. Kulbhushan says:

*The most astonishing thing was your doing that film....*

*When Maya was delivering your own triplets. (SB P.122)*

Thus, Ashok is depicted as a complete failure in performing his paternal roles and responsibilities. He performs only a marginal role as a father as far as his *paternal Dharma* is concerned. Though, he professes to love the family and its members, he never spares any time to spend with his children probably because of his busy schedule for film shooting. However, he gets this excuse to keep himself aloof and far away from the family.

Meanwhile, in the course of his career, he comes across Mehnaz Elahi, a beautiful budding actress whose beauty enslaves him. He finds himself spending most of time with her and thus neglects his own wife. As Mehnaz Elahi loves him, Ashok is enticed by her.

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Through the character of Mehnaz, Tharoor shows how film producers and directors sexually exploit actresses in turn of giving roles in movies. When Maya understands the affair between them, she is unable to bear all this and so she threatens Ashok about her reentry into the film world.

The novel *Show Business* depicts the workings of film world culture and the career of a fictional superstar named Ashok Banjara in this Show Business. The title has been explained in a numerous interviews by Tharoor which refers not only to Bollywood but politics and religion as well. The novel rotates around the Bombay cinema which mirrors the shattering values of the society. To get entry in Bollywood budding actresses are ready to surrender their bodies to the producers of cinema. The following quote is evidence to prove the argument:

*Someone gets a part by sleeping with the producer in the end what matters is that she has the part, the film is made, perhaps it's a hit, and then she's getting offers of lots of other parts she doesn't have to earn on her back. (SB P. 17)*

It draws its plan around the imaginary world of themes and the actual world of realities. Similarly, it also brings to the fore social, political and cultural realities and ideologies of contemporary India. It beautifully depicts degenerated values, hypocrisy of modern men, double standard of the celebrity people and how they are successful in concealing their real personalities and powers.

Tharoor has exposed truth of the film industry in this novel. There is much corruption prevalent in the Bollywood. There are incidents of the directors and producers sexually exploiting the actors and the actresses to give them a role in the movies. On one hand, Tharoor shows the glamorous life of the actors and actresses in the movie, but on the other hand, he reveals the hollowness and artificiality of their lives.

Tharoor is of the political ideology that the present Indian politicians have selfish attitude. They are very greedy to accumulate money, property, and so on. Tharoor mildly satirizes such political system for promoting castes for their political gain. The cinema is the world of make believe. It is the business of the film producer to show everything clear, simple, huge and magnified. Life in film is shown black and white in Technicolor. The political personage Kulbhushan Banjara, too, plays such a fictitious role even in his political life. He sums up –

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*“as a politician I too play a role in a world of make-believe, a world in which I pretend that the ideas and the principles and values that brought me into politics can still make a difference” (SB P. 118).*

Though, Ashok is elected as an MP, he is not considered for Ministerial office. He spends most of his days in the Lok Sabha in utter monotony. He is shown frustrated because he lacks attention in his political career. He is impatient with his normal status as a member of parliament as he is not given any special space or treatment in the parliamentary sessions. Therefore, he is addicted to his filmdom. This underlines wasteful consequences of the Indian democracy. Being fed up to the maltreatment given to Ashok, he avoids meeting the people from his constituency. He never lists people’s grievances and betrays all the promises he had made during election speeches.

**Multicultural Concerns in *Riot* (A Novel):**

*Riot* (2001) traces the events of cultural activism and religious confrontation in the Indian scenario. It is a study of the East-West cultural clash against the backdrop of the communal disturbances. It deals with various issues like communal clashes, aggression of multinational companies, riot of unethical love, women subjugation, problems of illiteracy, corruption, dowry system, superstitions, power politics, etc. But the gamut of issues is holding in two seminal points namely the Hindu–Muslim riot and the Indo–American love story. These two issues are connected and interwoven by the mysterious murder of Priscilla Hart.

Tharoor voices his assertive views on how culture is broken up due to the hatred between communities, and carefully delves into the controversy over the Babri Masjid. The backdrop of the novel is set in 1989 when Ram Sila Poojan Programme was undertaken by Hindus to rebuild the temple in Ram Janma Bhoomi which led to the destruction of Babri Masjid in 1992.

Tharoor depicts degradation of the Indian society in this novel. Besides, he deftly presents Indian kaleidoscopic culture that consists of a continuous play of history, culture and power. He deals with the multiple assaults on the Republic of India, such as language, religion, caste and class and how they play a significant role in breaking up Indian culture into individual entities. He also throws light on extra-marital affairs. He not only talks about pre-marital relations but post-marital affairs as well. This fact is made clear by depicting the characters like Rudyard, Lakshman, Nandini and Priscilla. Indeed extra-marital affair has been the problem with the people in India. This has been very concerning issue in India

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though we Indians boast of our culture. Tharoor satirically exposes the beauty under the cloths and presents humbug picture of the Indian society.

Being zealous and sympathetic for the upliftment of society, Tharoor takes sincere efforts so as to take place social reforms. He skillfully portrays the picture of the higher and lower strata of the Indian society. While delineating characters, Tharoor has a synoptic view of the social scenario in India. Hence, he selects typical men and women to depict social ideology in India. Even after knowing that Lakshman is married and having a daughter, Priscilla madly falls in love with him. Lakshman, too, finds Priscilla, someone with whom he could actually talk, discuss anything. Their rendezvous at the Kotli help them to know each other in every way. Their talks range from culture, history, politics and concept of marriage, to their past. This relationship develops to such an extent that Lakshman at times thinks of deserting Geetha for Priscilla with whom he plans to shift to America. But the age old traditions desists him from doing so and he confesses this to Priscilla –

*... forgive me, but I must end our relationship. I love you but I cannot leave my wife, my daughter, my job, my country, my whole life, for my love. (p.239)*

Geetha, who is traditionally married to Lakshman, finds out her husband's affair and helplessly seeks support from the God and Swamiji. Tharoor highlights on the problem of superstitions in India as well. Superstition plays a vital role in shaping and forming the destiny of Indian people. Indians believe in myths, stars, astrology and the lines on palms. Tharoor delineates the character of Lakshman's wife Geetha who is the representative of superstitious class. Geetha is presented both religious and superstitious by nature. A time comes when Geetha comes to know that Lakshman has decided to elope with Priscilla Hart to the USA, she goes to the temple of Lord Shiva and Swamiji. Instead of asking and considering about Lakshman's cunning deeds, she not only prays but also seeks the blessings from Lord Shiva so as to save her conjugal relationship.

*He said my husband was in love with another woman and wanted to leave me. It was the yellow-haired American woman, of course. And he was thinking of leaving my daughter and me and running off with her to America. (p. 226)*

Similarly she undergoes fasts and tries to seek blessings from the divine world. She implores Swamiji to conduct a special puja for her to help her have her husband. So she visits the Shiv Mandir on every Saturday where the Swamiji resides. To resolve this problem she speaks to Swamiji –

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... *What can I do Swamiji? I cannot talk to him about this it would kill me if I had to tell him what I knew! I can only turn to God, Swamiji, and to you. Please conduct a special puja for me to help me keep my husband. (p. 227)*

Through the portrayal of Geetha, Tharoor opens up a vista of the every residing superstitious attitude of a traditional wife. She is ready to do anything to protect her family. She does nothing, but expects a lot from God and Swamiji.

Tharoor portrays the shallowness of Lakshman's personality, bereft of concern, and respect for his family, his job and his nation. Lakshman evaluates his affair with Priscilla as an avenue to a comfortable life in America. He avers –

*Priscilla is consolation, she is escape, but she is more than that: she is a fantasy come true, the possibility of an alternative life, as if another planet had flung its doors open for me. (p.155)*

Priscilla's beauty infatuates Lakshman though he is married. He finds pleasure and solace with her company. Both Lakshman and Priscilla visit the Kotli, the meeting place, on every Tuesday and Saturday neglecting familial and service responsibilities. Lakshman is unable to forget Priscilla as his days on the job are illuminated by the images of Priscilla's face and body and the memory of her touch. Lakshman emotionally reveals –

*When I am with her I am in a constant state of exhilaration. I greet her with glee as runs into my arms; I exult as she disrobes for me; I am ecstatic as we make – that word again – love. Until Priscilla I had never really known the pleasure of sex. (p. 156)*

Geetha, Lakshman's wife, after seeing Lakshman's business she neither initiates nor welcomes life. Though they lead conjugal life, they spend loveless years of marriage. Geetha turns away from Lakshman. There is no clear and mutual understanding between both of them as Lakshman's attention is diverted due to his intimacy with Priscilla Hart. He frankly admits and reveals –

*Not surprisingly, we make love less and less frequently. Since Priscilla entered my life, I have slept with Geetha just once. Neither of us misses it. (p. 156)*

Sundari is depicted as a symbol of women's subjugation in the novel. She is the married sister of Kadambari who is co-colleague of Priscilla. She is a helpless prey of the male dominated society. Even though, she is very honest and loyal, Rupesh, her husband and mother-in-Law beat her every now and then. She is hated and cursed as a witch all the time

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though her father gives one lakh rupees as a dowry in her marriage. Thus, the evil of dowry is highlighted through the letter of Priscilla to Cindy Valeriani.

*In many parts of India a government job is the ultimate accomplishment, and being in the IAS is the government job to end all government jobs. So fathers of eligible daughters double the dowries on offer when an IAS candidate heaves into view. Listen to one story: Lucky tells me a couple of his college friends fell in love and wanted to get married. (p.93)*

Sundari is given maltreatment and is placed inferior to male. She is accused of her luck as a few months after their marriage; Rupesh has to lose his job. After that Sundari gets worse treatment in the family. All the members in the family blame her accounting her bad luck which brings unhappiness to the family. That's why; the birth of a girl child is not a welcome thing in India. For many Indians, the birth of a male child is considered as the line of the family and a welcome thing. The family members of Sundari are no exception to this fact. They expect the birth of a male child from Sundari. They wrongly think that women are responsible for begetting a male or female baby. When Sundari gets pregnant that time her mother-in-law reiterates and condemns-

*What use is this woman who does no work around the house and can not even produce a son? (p. 248)*

In presence of Sundari's mother-in-law, Rupesh burns Sundari alive mercilessly. When the police inquire about Sundari's death, the case is foisted as the kitchen mishap. Thus, a male dominated society is presented by Tharoor.

**Summing up:**

On the whole, Tharoor stands out as a distinguished figure in the history of Indian Writing in English as his novels develop certain specific strategies in order to address directly some of the central concerns of contemporary India. He proves himself a successful novelist in mingling the ancient themes of public issues with the modern issues in India. The satirical tone in his novels is nothing but an indication of the novelist's concern for lack of values on the part of characters. He highlights the fact that glamorous actors of Bollywood utterly fail in their lives on the personal front. The novels also throw light on the degeneration of India from *Dharma* to *Adharma*, nobility to brutality. Tharoor exposes the hollowness and artificiality of the celluloid culture as it presents a world of make believes before the spectators. He not only satirizes cinema culture but also political culture in India. *Riot* examines some of the socio-cultural vital issues like confrontation between Hindu and

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Muslim culture, the East-West cultural clash, premarital/extramarital relationship, dowry deaths, subordination of women, superstitions, violence in home and outside, gender inequality, and exploitation of women in Indian society. In short, Tharoor's novels present a microcosm of ill effects on Indian women due to male dominated society.

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