

**MYTH AND HISTORY = MYSTERY? – A PARADOXICAL  
BREACH OF CANON IN THE NOVELS OF SHASHI THAROOR**

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**Abstract**

The research paper seeks to find an academic solution to the problem of the ambiguity in the postmodern interpretation of the tropes of ‘history’ and ‘myth’ in the novels of Shashi Tharoor. The postmodern breach of canon/dominant discourse is structured through the use of parody in the novels analysed. The use of Bakhtin’s idea of ‘carnavalesque’ analyses the inversion of the dominant order of the mythological, historical and the social narratives. Carnavalesque refers to a literary mode which indicates subversion and liberation of the dominant discourse, with the help of humour, revelry and chaos. The chiasmatic formulation of the myth of historical events and the historicism of mythology sums up the two discourses individually as arbitrary, producing a significant meaning to the formulation. The end result structures the titular equation: *Myth and History = Mystery*, as practically applicable for the postmodern analysis of Tharoor’s novels in a postcolonial setup.

**Keywords:** Postmodern, Parody, Metafiction, History, Myth, Carnavalesque.

The authentic vision of a writer necessarily evolves out of his/her notion of power. A postmodern writer situated within a postcolonial context, is subject to different forms of power, which emanates from various discourses. The Foucauldian notion of power, which forms a central aspect of New Historicist thought, can be applied to postmodern fiction, which represents the power subversion paradigm. Myth and history are arguably the two concepts, which are codified and structured as per convenience, in a postmodern sense. It is debatable whether the mysterious or the arbitrary nature lies in the very existence/belief in the two concepts, or whether does it lie in its postmodern interpretation.

A close reading at the novels of Shashi Tharoor decide the impermanence of the tropes of myth and history, which are constantly decoded to suit the postmodern interpretation. The postmodern novel is the writer’s intentional breach with the conventional modes of thought, meaning and essence of a text. A postmodern literature stylistically and ideologically relies on

several conventions like, paradox, pastiche, metafiction, fragmentation, unreliable narrators, dark humour, paranoia, often unrealistic plots and authorial self reference.

The paradoxical situations in the works of Shashi Tharoor, decode the factual elements of history and mythology and places it in terms of the contemporary scenario of national politics and the socio-cultural basis. It is in the opinion of Linda Hutcheon in her article “The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History” (1987) that parody like Bertolt Brecht’s ‘*Verfremdungseffekt*’, works to distance and at the same time involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity (Hutcheon 206). The essence of an interpretation lies in its receptivity. The new tendencies of the reception of a historical/mythological fact or incident, is essentially a deconstructed version of the original. Contemporary postmodern ways of reading and interpreting a text, decodes its originality. It challenges the authenticity of the written scribbling of the author and vests the full responsibility of meaning making on the readers. This, in the opinion of Roland Barthes is theorized as the Readers’ Response Theory, where symbolically the death of the author affects the birth of the readers.<sup>1</sup>

The new development in hermeneutics decodes historiographic metafiction as not only re-writings of the original story or myth, but also as writing beyond the margins of the original text. Such versions of the original capitalise the gaps and fissures in the narratives of the parent-text, and brings about a viable reproduction of it as a work of art. In this regard, it however needs a special attention that historiographic metafiction is writings not just ‘beyond’, but rather ‘from’ the margins. The entire power equations are distorted – it now works from the margin to the centre. Hence, it is a fight of the marginalised voice towards the dominant ideology – a breach in the canon as an established authorial voice. Jean Rhyss’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), a rewriting of the Victorian fiction *Jane Eyre* (1847) by Charlotte Bronte and *Foe* (1986) by J.M. Coetzee, a rewriting of Daniel Defoe’s *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), are the prominent examples of the re-creation of the conventional/canonical original text. The newer versions bring out the marginal, submerged voice, specifically to challenge the discourses of gender, race and nationality.

The challenge to the discourse of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality leads to an arbitrary interpretation of the original (authorial intention). Shashi Tharoor decodes the authorial intention of the grand old Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, written by the sage Ved Vyas, as a part of the religious, political, economic, social and moral dictum. The recreation of the past (myth) in the lines of the Indian historical events ranging from about two decades before the attainment of independence till the time of the novel, juggles the time and space of the mythical super-reality to the historical reality. The two different spaces merge and mingle to form Tharoor’s new story of *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). It is a parallel interpretation of historically viewing the Indian myth – the story of the *Mahabharata*, the teachings of the *Bhagwat Gita* and the gospel of the *dharma yuddha* – and observing the mythic significance of the historical facts and events. This chiasmatic formulation of the historicism of mythology and the myth of historical events, involves poignant postmodern devices used by the novelist.

The postmodern absence or the dearth of grand-narratives, involves a deconstruction of the larger-than-life story telling of the grand events in a grand narration. In the opinion of **Jean-François Lyotard**, in his classic 1979 work *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, all ideological, institutional and dominant forms of knowledge are considered

illegitimate. Knowledge is the supreme source of power, the decidable factor of the economic base.

It is widely accepted that knowledge has become the principle force of production over the last few decades; this has already had a noticeable effect on the composition of the work of the work force of the most highly developed countries and constitutes the major bottleneck for the developing countries. In the postindustrial and postmodern age, science will maintain and no doubt strengthen its pre-eminence in the arsenal of the productive capacities of the nation states. (Lyotard 5)

The use of paradoxical situations in *The Great Indian Novel*, mystify the components of myth and history. This obfuscation of the real meaning is due to the postmodern denial of absolutes, for an interpretation of a text. Shashi Tharoor uses myth and history interchangeably to decode each other, which is to be interpreted as a typical postmodern rejection of absolute truths and grand-narratives. Hence, mythology is deconstructed in the lines of the twentieth century, to understand its pertinence, as well as to make it appear less unrealistic.

Parody in a postmodern sense, is a device used by the writer to playfully mock at the own self (and creativity) and the nation state alike. M.H. Abrams observes ‘parody’ and ‘burlesque’ as quite similar, which is used in a text as:

an incongruous imitation, that is, it imitates the matter (the form and style) or else, the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary *genre*, in verse or in prose, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter. (Abrams 26)

The main thematic significance of parody is imitation, which is rather carnivalesque, than serious. Mikhail Bakhtin in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays* (1981) states that the carnivalesque is used to subvert and liberate the dominant order/discourse.<sup>ii</sup> According to Bakhtin:

Contrary to modern canons, the grotesque body is not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world, that is, the parts through the world enters the body or emerges from it, or through which the body itself goes out to meet the world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose. The body discloses its essence as a principle of growth which exceeds its own limits only in copulation, pregnancy, childbirth, the throes of death, eating, drinking or defecation. This is the ever unfinished, ever creating body, the link in the chain of genetic development, or more correctly speaking, two links shown at the point where they enter into each other. This especially strikes the eye in archaic grotesque. (*Rabelais and His World* 26)

Parody in *The Great Indian Novel* is located at both the thematic and structural levels. All the 18 books of *The Mahabharata* are parodied here, with each book having a titular affinity. As a postmodern text, each of the chapter titles, have a reference to other texts by other writers: the fifth book is titled ‘The Powers of Silence’, an allusion to Paul Scott’s *The Towers of Silence*, the

seventh book is titled 'The Son Also Rises', which is an allusion to Earnest Hemingway's *The Sun Also Rises*, the eight book is titled 'Midnight's Parents', which is an allusion to Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the ninth book is titled 'Him – Or, The Far Power Villain', which is an allusion to Kipling's *Kim* and M.M. Kaye's *The Far Pavilions*, the tenth book 'Darkness at Dawn' is an allusion to Arthur Koestler's *Darkness at Noon*, the sixteenth book is titled 'The Bungle Book', which is an allusion to Kipling's *The Jungle Book*. Questioning the sanctity of mythology is obvious, as Tharoor parodies not just the holy epic, but even the Vedas. The fourteenth book is titled 'The Rigged Veda', a part derogatory analogy to the Sanskrit praise verse, *Rig Veda*.

At the thematic level, the larger than life characters of the epic parallel the makers of modern India, who were the political thinkers and leaders of the larger part of the twentieth century. Merging the ideologies of the Father of the Nation, Mahatma Gandhi, to the self sacrificing grand old man of the epic *Mahabharata* – living across four generations – Bhishma; Tharoor de-canonises the self sacrificing patriarchal figure of the Kuru dynasty to the non-violent mass leader, Mahatma Gandhi. The character of Gangaji hence created as a result, is a combination of the epical '*Ganga-putra*' (Bhishma, the son of the Ganges) and the common way in which M.K. Gandhi would be beckoned, Gandhiji. Both the characters had tremendous mass appeal, the weightage of the experience of old age and acute patriarchal authority, with which both of them could be either the iconic '*Pitamaha*' (or paternal grand-father) of the Pandavas, or 'Bapu' (colloquial term for father) for the citizens of colonised India. The pre-independent British colony India equates the Kaurava-dominated Hastinapur of the grand epic, which to any postmodern reader can seem palimpsestic<sup>iii</sup>, as the stories of Hastinapur of the Vedic times and India of the twentieth century are not just the similar sagas of ill domination and misuse of power, but are equally path makers for the succeeding generations.

The title of Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* seems a literal translation of the title of the epic which it artfully parodies. '*Maha*' in Hindi (a language of the Devnagri script) means great and '*Bharata*' means India, a name given to the country based on the legendary emperor Bharata, the son of Shakuntala and Dushyanta, who is even the originator of the '*Bharat vansha*' or the Bharat dynasty, under which the Kauravas and Pandavas fall. Tharoor frames his story in the appropriate background of the epic, which had been Hinduism's greatest literary achievement.

De-canonising the original perspective or the point of view is a key feature in postmodern interpretation. The original narrator of the epic (also a witness to all the inter-generational events, as a character in the epic), Ved Vyas, is parodied in its abbreviated (and abridged) self, V.V. – ji, who is 88 years old and has retired from politics. (Can this be paralleled as the hermit's retirement from Hastinapur and its associated events after the battle at Kurukshetra?) In the novel, he introduces himself as: "I was born with the century, a bastard, but a bastard in a fine tradition, the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a travelling sage." (*The Great Indian Novel* 19) This character finds its modern Indian substitute in C. Rajagopalachari, a close associate of Gandhi and the last Governor-General of India. This Gandhi-Rajagopalachari affinity is linked to the bond between Bhishma and Ved Vyas, who were actually half brothers. Ganapathi acts as a scribe to V.V.- ji, like Ganesha to Vyas. This comparison has been brought out with references to affinity in several physical attributes between the modern Ganapathi and the original elephant

headed God of the same name with big nose, intelligent eyes and substantial belly. Both Vyas and Ganesha (or V.V.-ji and Ganapati) play the role of the narrator and writer, respectively.

Lady Georgiana Drewpad, the wife of the viceroy and the lover of Dhritarashtra, is the parodied version of Lady Edwina Mountbatten, the wife of Lord Louis Mountbatten, who was supposedly rumoured to be the paramour of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru held a premier position in the face of the politics surrounding the pre-independent and post-independence movements, as an active politician and the first Prime Minister of the independent India. His blind idealism (less of practical realism) made him Tharoor's Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapur. Pandu, on the contrary, is a clear version of Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, the establisher of Indian National Army; an ideological opponent of Gandhiji, who mysteriously disappeared (and perhaps died) in a flight in 1945 (like Tharoor's Pandu). Vidur Hastinapuri is the dual self of the original Vidur in the *Mahabharata*; the latter was the prime minister to Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Duryodhan, was the well-wisher of the Pandavas. Tharoor's Vidur has closer affinity to Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, the iconic Iron Man of India and the founder of Indian Administrative Service, due to the firmness in the personality of his namesake. Jayaprakash Drona, a clear allusion to Dronacharya (or Drona), the teacher or guru to the Pandavas and Kauravas, has a reference to Jayaprakash Narayan, an ex-freedom fighter, leader of the Janata Party, and an opposition to Mrs. Indira Gandhi. In the novel, Draupadi Mokrasī is the illegitimate daughter of Dhritarashtra and Lady Drewpad, and is the joint wife of all the five Pandavas, which is a parody of the character of the fire born Draupadi (whose birth is not natural), the heroine of the epic and the wife to the Pandavas. In the *Mahabharata*, Draupadi is the binding force for the Pandavas, symbolising a space wherein they all become one. In the perspective of the character mimicked by Tharoor, Draupadi Mokrasī symbolises democracy, the ultimate people's government, for which all the freedom fighters were struggling. Mythologically, the insult generated to Draupadi (the 'vastra haran' episode), was a fuel to the fire in the Kaurav-Pandav enmity and hence a premier cause for the war. In modern Indian history, the freedom of the country had been at stake by the British rule and had to be freed. Hence, the portrayal of Draupadi Mokrasī is ambiguous and full of multiple meanings.

Viscount Drewpad, originally refers to Drupad, the king of Panchal kingdom and father to Draupadi, Dhristadhumna and Shikhandi. However, the portrayal of the character has strict affinity to Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India. The character of Tharoor's Gandhari is based on the life of the long suffering wife of Pandit Nehru, Kamala Nehru, where the latter had to bear the infidelity of the former on many occasions. Gandhari's brother in the epic, Shakuni (the ruler of Gandhar kingdom), the root cause of all evil in the minds of the Kauravas, has been recreated as Shakuni Shankar De in Tharoor's novel. This character bears strong resemblance to Siddhartha Shankar Ray (who had been the Chief Minister of West Bengal from 1972-1977 and former Governor to the state of Punjab), who held emergency dictatorial powers in West Bengal during the Emergency under the Prime Ministerial regimen of Mrs. Gandhi. Amba Shikhandin (Amba in the previous birth and Shikhandin the next, as per the epic) in Tharoor's novel is an interesting juxtaposition of the two successive births, firstly as Amba, a princess and secondly, Shikhandi, an eunuch. She had been instrumental for the death of Bhishma and can be interpreted as a replica of Nathuram Godse, the assassinator of M.K. Gandhi (Gangaji or Tharoor's Bhishma).

The Indian National Congress takes the form of the Kaurav Party in the novel, and Priya Duryodhani is the head and an autocratic leader of the party. A resemblance of the character with Indira Gandhi is obvious to the readers. The declaration of Emergency in the 1970s by Mrs. Gandhi can be seen as Duryodhan's direct responsibility for the cause of the battle. Mohammad Ali Karna's character is based on the warrior Karna in the epic, who by blood is an unknown Pandava, but is affiliated to the Kauravas out of gratitude for Duryodhan. Tharoor's character Mohammad Ali Karna bears strong resemblance to Mohammad Ali Jinnah, the Father of Pakistan, who started off his career as Nehru and Gandhi's colleague at the Indian National Congress. Pakistan is parodied here as Karnistan (or the land created by Karna). Kunti and Sun God (*Surya dev*) were the biological parents of Karna in the epic. The Solar paternity of Karna, remains the same in the parodied version, as Mohammad Ali Karna's paternity has been attributed to Hyperion Helios. It is to be observed that in Greek mythology, Hyperion and Helios refer to the Sun God.

The People's Front in the novel represents the modern day Janata Party, symbolised by the Pandavas, wherein Yudhishtir, the honest and truthful prince, represents the character of Morarji Desai, the fourth Prime Minister of India, famous for his honest but ineffective means. Yudhishtir's just and honest ways make him the replica of the Indian Judiciary (as he is the son of *Yama*, the lord of justice and death). Bhim, the son of *Vayu* or Air God, represents strength and valour. He is the quintessential replica of the Indian Army. Arjun, the third of the Pandavas, is the son of God Indra; is the vital most of all in the entire troop of the Pandavas. He represents journalism and media. Nakul and Sahadeva, the twins of Madri (fathered by the Ashwini Kumars), represent the Civil Service and the Foreign Service respectively. It is to be observed that all the five of them aim towards a common goal, which is the Indian Democracy, parodied as Draupadi (Mokراسي) or the common wife to all of them.

The enigmatic Krishna's role has been taken over by D. Krishna Menon, a South-Indian politician, who is Arjun's friend and advisor. The role of Krishna Menon, reverberates the role of the Divine in the midst of the barbaric cry for power. Ashwathama, the brave son of Dronacharya and a close confidante of Duryodhan in the epic, is named the same by Tharoor. According to the novel, Ashwathama joins the opposition after being mistreated by Duryodhani and becomes the new Deputy Prime Minister in Yudhishtir's government. However, a close look at the politics of the 1970s decade, indicate that there are close links with this character and the real life politician, Jagjivan Ram. The latter had been the Defence Minister in the Indira Gandhi government, but had joined the opposition during the Emergency and later held the same portfolio under the Morarji Desai government at the call of Jaiprakash Narayan. (Interestingly, Tharoor's political story of India implies Jayprakash Narayan and Jagjivan Ram to be father and son, respectively; as they were his versions of Dronacharya and Ashwathama.)<sup>iv</sup>

In his *The Oxford Book of Parodies* (2010), John Gross notes:

Parodies come in many shapes and sizes, and many different degrees of subtlety or its reverse. There are mocking parodies and affectionate parodies, parodies which are exquisitely accurate, and parodies which are rough-edged but effective . . . Parody can be the most entertaining form of criticism, and one of the most delicate. (Gross xi)

Shashi Tharoor parodies myth in his first novel, in the light of the colonial and postcolonial historical events. Myths are fundamental to any culture or civilization and are

carried out across generations. Interpolation in these stories/myths makes them flexible. The ambiguity lies in the way these are interpreted and accepted by the society, which provides an element of mysteriousness associated with it. However, it shall be made clearer with an analysis of the other two novels by Tharoor.

*Show Business* (1991) is a parody on the Indian Bollywood cinema at large and the life of superstar Amitabh Bachhan (as Ashok Banjara) at a microcosmic level. However, there are three levels of meaning in the titular phrase. At the first level, 'show business' refers to stardom and the showmanship of the film industry, which has to camouflage its hidden dark reality of demoralising failure. At the second level, the parody is on the domain of politics, which equally is a masquerade of the hidden secrecies of nationhood. Thirdly, this applies to the domain of religion, which has become a means of business for some spiritual leaders, who subterfuge the devotees in the name of the Supreme Power. The common element in all the three interpretations is the resulting hypocrisy attached to all the three institution of domination in the society. It is essential to note here that entertainment can also be a means of domination in the society, as an institutional form of entertainment (like Bollywood) springs out from some dire support from the world of politics. Moreover, canons are quickly formed and broken in such an industry, which is guided by the rat-race policy; where consecutive hits can make the actor a superstar and successive flops may pull down his/her career. Cinema and politics have been neatly interwoven in the plot of the novel, which is reflected by the protagonist's (or Amitabh Bachhan's real life) oscillating shift in profession, from acting to politics and again back to the former. Ups and downs in the film or the political career are similar, the hits and flops of films can be compared to the victory or loss in an elections, at a metaphoric level.

Bhavesh D. Parmar notes in his article "The Reflection of Indianness in Shashi Tharoor's Work" (2013) that: "through a montage film narrative, shooting scripts, songs and monologues, he invents a fictional world that becomes an expressive metaphor for deeper truths: illusion and reality, ambition and greed, love, deception and death" (Parmar 2). Bollywood reflects the transformation of the Indian psyche from a post-colonial pastiche of different sensibilities of the 1950s to the confident global Indian of present century. The world of the cinema stands in stark contrast to the world of reality, as the merging of reel-life and the real-life incidents causes friction in the life of the protagonist, Ashok Banjara. (This is even applicable in some respects for the life of Amitabh Bachhan himself, according to Tharoor's point of view in the story. It needs an analysis here.) Films are a copy or an imitation of the everyday events in the human society. For Banjara, the illusion became reality, firstly, as he got identified not as he himself but as the larger than life (angry young man) characters that he portrayed on screen, and secondly, he got linked up in a relationship with his prominent co-star, Mehnaz Ilahi (with whom he had several on-screen romance scenes). Mehnaz's character is clearly based on the life of the yester year actress Parveen Babi. However, from the perspective of Bollywood, Mehnaz's character can also be attributed to the actress Rekha, who had not just been a co-actress to Amitabh Bachhan (in romantic films), but also had a hidden affair with him, must to the disgust of the wife, Jaya Bhaduri (portrayed as the docile and dutiful Maya in the movie). The series of other vital incidents in the life of the real superstar have been portrayed in the character of Banjara, for instance, the accident during the shooting of the film *Coolie* (1982), after being knocked down (accidentally) by the actor Puneet Issar; where the latter was to play the negative part. The consequent hospitalisation with streaming millions of population crowding outside the hospital

and praying for the superstar's speedy recovery, have been clearly portrayed. Bachhan's joining politics before making a comeback to Hindi films have also been replicated in the main story line. In fact, it is here exactly at this point in the novel where the readers can acquaint themselves with the second thematic significance of the show business, politics.

The political world is equally dominated by the rat-race principle of show business. The glamour (or show) in politics lies in the vast expenses incurred in the elections and the consequent filling up of the coffers of the ministers and other politicians, from the funds which were originally to be used for the welfare of the masses. Bachhan's political career was a short-lived unsuccessful one, spanning from 1984-1987. His decision to join politics was because of the nearly fatal accident met on the sets of *Coolie*. The world of politics in the novel *Show Business* is represented through the characters of Ashok's father Kulbushan Banjara, and brother, Ashwin Banjara.

*Show Business* is a satire on the contemporary politics, religion and the film industry, projected through the life of the protagonist, Ashok Banjara. The use of burlesque is evident when the readers can relate it to the parallel story of the real superstar. In fact, the novel is a satire on just the superstar himself, but the whole show business of the film industry (politics and religion running parallel to it) and even on the audiences who are in awe of such show business making superstars and film worlds. Tharoor, through his satire, creates a dual personality of Bachhan in the form of Banjara, questioning the original incidents and events in the former's life; with his own version of the tale, as reflected through the latter's life. The parodied version of the original events or character(s) de-historicise the real set of events. The ambiguousness in the meaning of the novel *Show Business* lies in the deconstructed set of events underlying the background of the novel.

In *Riot: A Love Story* (2001), Tharoor's last novel till date, the mystery behind the duality of history and myth lies in the oxymoronic essence of the title, a love story gaining prominence in the midst of a riot. It is a novel set around a riot in the year 1989 in India. As a novel, it is a tale of the parallel stories of love and hatred: the love between the American N.G.O. worker, Priscilla Hart and her Indian married paramour, Laxman, in the midst of the Hindu-Muslim riots, a couple of years predating the famous Babri Masjid demolition issue. It is a story of the dual conflicts of the binaries of culture and religion – the conflicts of the East and the West, and the clash caused by the religious fanaticism of the Hindus and the Muslims. The backdrop of Zalilgarh, a small town in Uttar Pradesh, acts as the zone of fire: a ground for cross-cultural clashes and hatred.

History (and even mythology for that matter), has no fixed legitimate ownership. Postmodernism (as already discussed previously in the opinion of Lyotard) denies any legitimacy of the original, ethnic, dominant discourse. The annals of history produce a pseudo-real image of the original events, which are subjectively represented. The obliqueness of history (and mythology) is due to a certain perspective, which may not be valid in the postmodern terms. (His)story is hence a narration of certain past factual events which can be altered to produce a new meaning, which reads a cultural artifact from the margin to the centre, in a dominant discourse. The novel, *Riot* chronicles the inter-religious conflicts – the Hindu-Muslim riots, which are the consequences of the post-partition secular India. Tharoor parodies, and quite correctly, holds the politicians responsible for such barbaric mass slaughter, in the form of riots, under the name of religion.

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The void between illusion and reality is dominant in *Riot*. The external demand for peace on the part of the politicians is in stark contrast to the scenario of the riot, which was an outcome of their lack of tolerance for the other's religion. The novel portrays utter chaos: communal disharmony (riots), torture against women (instance of Sundari, who is harassed for dowry by her in-laws), illicit relationships (Laxman and Priscilla) and the blind superstition of religion (represented by Laxman's wife, Gita). These are several issues addressed by the author, and each of the characters represents these vices/characteristic traits satisfactorily. The novel centres on Priscilla Hart's murder and reflects the hypocrisies surrounding the investigation. (Laxman is scared not to let the illicit relationship be open.)

These multilayered narratives shed light on the myth or the illusion of secularism. This strikes the keynote of the novel, which in turn, strikes onto the face of the contemporary Indians as a problematic question, the answer to which is unattainable. Tharoor's *Riot* is not just a fictional tale of love surrounding the communal turmoil, but is also a study of the East-West encounter in the midst of such disturbances. Rudyard Kipling in his *Ballad of East and West* expresses:

Oh, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet, Till  
Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgement Seat; But there is  
neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth, When two strong men  
stand face to face, tho' they come from the ends of the earth! (Kipling 1)

The refrain from the ballad fully justifies the relationship of Laxman and Priscilla, an attraction which is not destined to be fulfilled in the riot-ridden Zalilgarh. In *Riot: A Love Story*, two narratives run parallel: first, national barrier or East (Laxman/Gita) vis-a-vis West (Priscilla, and later her family who arrive at India to investigate her murder); and second, the religious barrier (the cause of the riots).

The narrative structure of the novel is journalistic, to some extent, fragmentary and not concrete. The story is unfolded through a series of letters, news clips, reports and diary entries. The fragmented structure of the narrative is a metaphor on the fragmented lives of the characters. From this observation, Tharoor is Eliotesque in his dealing with the characters and situations in this novel.

The titular interrogative equation of *Myth and History = Mystery?* fits in the analysis of the mythological and historical tropes in the novels of Shashi Tharoor. The vital concern in this paper has been on the nebulousness of the dominant discourses of myth, history, race, gender and ethnicity to evolve as decentred postmodern interpretation. The broken narratives of Tharoor – using the parallel tales of myth and history in *The Great Indian Novel*, the parody on the real character through the reel character in *Show Business*, and the dilemma of communalism and cross-cultural connection in *Riot: A Love Story*; compresses the vastness of the narratives of time and space into a compact whole. Tharoor, as a novelist, artfully represents the crisis in the dominant canonical discourses with carnivalesque strategies to imply at the mysteriousness (ambiguity) of it.

### Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> Readers' Response Criticism or Theory gained prominence in the 1960s and 70s. It focuses on the readers' (or the audiences') reaction to a particular text, as a part of poststructuralist thought; which

emphasises on the readers' (or the audiences') active involvement in the meaning making and final interpretation of a text. The text is assumed meaningless before the readers read it and give it their interpretation. The theory was popular in United States of America, Germany and France. Important theorists are Roland Barthes, Stanley Fish, Wolfgang Iser, David Bleich, Norman Holland and Hans-Robert Jauss.

<sup>ii</sup> Carnavalesque refers to a literary mode which indicates subversion and liberation of the dominant discourse, with the help of humour, revelry and chaos. Mikhail Bakhtin traces its origins to the concept of carnival or the Feast of Fools, a medieval festival originally of the sub-deacons of the cathedral, held about the time of the Feast of Circumcision (usually January 1), in which a number of sacred cathedral ceremonies were burlesqued. The four categories of Carnavalesque used by Bakhtin are: familiar and free interaction between people, eccentric (unacceptable) behaviour, carnivalistic misalliances and the sacrilegious events. In the postmodern field of criticism, carnivalesque is used as a medium of deconstructing the dominant discourse (often humourously).

<sup>iii</sup> Palimpsest refers to re-writings on a paper or manuscript from either a scroll or a book, from which the original or the previous text has been washed away for reuse of the paper. The word 'palimpsest' is taken from the Latin word '*palimpsestus*' or the Greek '*palimpsestous*', which means scratched again or scrapped off. However, in the postmodern sense, the word can be used theoretically for deconstructing the grand narratives. It can act as a proper justification for the historiographical metafiction or the postmodern re-writings of several canonical texts. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a perfect palimpsest of the grand Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*.

<sup>iv</sup> There are other minor characters in *The Great Indian Novel*, which have not been taken up for analysis here due to space constraint. However, the major ones have been reflected here for greater understanding of the equation of myth and history juxtaposing to form an ambiguous possibility of meaning making.

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