Reflection of India in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel: A Cultural Studies Approach

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Abstract

India is a vast melting pot of many civilizations. Indian culture is complicated by the multiplicity of races, religions, dialects, clothing, rituals, customs, and traditions because it is a country where people are separated into diverse ethnic, religious, caste, language, and other groups. The present paper looks at the diversity of Indian culture as a result of democracy and secular practices. However, it also considers the dividing elements that stifle national unity. Its goal is to reveal India's ethos, culture, and the political aspects that hold the country together. Simultaneously, with reference to Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel, it reveals the power systems that exist in its culture and politics. It is emphasized the importance of cultural studies in exposing authoritarian ideologies. It exhibits essential cultural studies topics such as representation, discourse, identity, and ideology, which have been helpful in studying the novel.

Keywords

Culture, Cultural Studies, Indian Culture, Identity, Ideology, Diversity

Introduction

India's culture must be understood in its entirety. As a consequence, India's pluralism must be thoroughly examined. Many writers have attempted to convey the complexities of Indian culture in their works. Shashi Tharoor depicts India as a culture and a nation, with all of its cultural richness, nuances, and political structure. Tharoor emphasizes India's pan-cultural image. It also looks into the idea that India's eclectic culture has been shaped over time by polytheism, multiculturalism, multilingualism, diverse customs, religions, and rituals, as well as a constitutional republic nation divided into twenty-nine states and seven union territories that believes in "unity in diversity." *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor illustrates the advantages and faults of India's plurality.

Definitions of Culture

"Culture" comes from the words "cultura" and "colored," which mean "to cultivate." Culture is a multifaceted phenomenon that encompasses religion, expressive art, folk culture, festivities, rituals, and consumer habits. To elaborate, culture has long been seen as a tool for achieving civilized human life. It is a collection of beliefs, arts, moralities, conventions, traditions, eating habits, and ways of living and acting in a certain civilization. It is varied and plural by nature. At both the neighborhood and national levels, human behavior, social activities, and expressive forms vary greatly. A group's culture is expressed via its language, clothes, traditions, beliefs, and politics.

"Culture" meant "civilization" throughout the Enlightenment era. Culture symbolized the development of communities into civilizations. Following the rise of nationalism in the nineteenth century, culture came to symbolize various and distinct ways of life that differed around the globe. The word is defined by Raymond Williams as follows:

Culture is a description of a particular way of life that expresses certain meanings and values not only in art and learning but also in institutions and ordinary behavior. The analysis of culture, from such a definition, is the clarification of the meanings and values implicit and explicit in particular ways of life, a particular "culture". (57)

'The common understandings, values, standards, and beliefs of a community bond its members together, enabling a person to discriminate between good and evil, morality and immorality, and so forth. Tylor describes culture as "Culture or civilization, in its broad anthropological meaning, is that complex totality which comprises knowledge and religion, art and morality as well as law and custom, and any other talents or habits acquired by man as a member of the community" (23). A

three-stage progression from savagery through barbarism to civilization is how he sees the formation of society. Thus, civilization was seen as a synonym for culture. Western nations were regarded to be examples for other societies to follow since they were seen to have acquired civilization.

Culture' in Cultural Studies

In 1964, the University of Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies was established, and this was the beginning of the field of Cultural Studies. Richard Hoggart and Raymond Williams understood that the literary studies programs at Oxford and Cambridge were lacking the working-class background from which they had both emerged. Thus, the divide between high and popular culture, in which high culture was elevated, was exposed. Stuart Hall joined the field of Cultural Studies in order to uncover the ways in which hegemony is used to justify and naturalize high culture in order to preserve power in the ruling class or community. To put it another way, Cultural Studies are able to reveal the possibility of reversing the ideology-laden binaries such as male/female, colonizing/colonized and so on.

First, cultural studies go beyond the limitations of a single subject, such as literary criticism or history, in that it is concerned with the manifestations of culture in daily life rather than literature or art. As a result, architectural styles and body piercing may be investigated as part of Cultural Studies. Cultural Studies, on the other hand, is politically active. Cultural critics question the unfair discriminations generated by power institutions. They see culture or identity as socially produced and a result of the power system in place. As a result, concepts such as literary classics and the autonomy of a literary figure as "a Great Man" are questioned. The goal of cultural studies is to achieve equality between the dominant and the submissive. Third, Cultural Studies rejects the distinction between high and low culture, as well as elite and popular culture. Traditionally, culture was regarded as high culture.

India as Cultures

The vastness of India's cultural diversity is a distinguishing feature. Ethnicities, religions, dialects, clothes, rituals, customs, and traditions all showed a wide spectrum of diversity. As a result, Indian culture is shown in a highly rich and conflicting manner. Indian culture resists efforts to categorize it in a single way. Understanding its intricacies necessitates a dive into units based on ethnic, religious, caste, language, and regional identities. India as a country is not founded on the principles of language, religion, or ethnicity homogeneity. It is a place where people are bound together by a common history of resistance to the British Empire, a feeling of integration after the Muslim invasion, and a primal legacy of tolerance for

difference. India's identity is defined by its people's resolve to stick together, as well as a democratic political system that allows them to do so. In order to comprehend Indian culture, it is necessary to grasp the distinctions, deviations, and diversities, as well as the parallels, similarities, and commonalities in the Indian social sphere. It is even more crucial to investigate its political system, which is based on democracy and secularism and has safeguarded national cohesion in times of crisis.

The Great Indian Novel: Study from the Lens of Cultural Studies Approach

Shashi Tharoor explains why he wants to write The Great Indian Novel. At the outset, his omniscient narrator tells Brahma that he plans to "speak of past, present, and future of existence and passing, efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth; of what is, what was, and what should have been; of what is, what was, and what should have been" (18). *Maha* means great, and *Bharata* signifies India, therefore the title itself is a nod to the ancient epic. The connection is intriguing, but the author has taken far too many liberties in linking India's history with its present. It casts doubt on the finality of truth and the certainty of meaning. In his work, Tharoor conforms to postmodernist ideas. As a result, the story is written in both prose and poetry. It mocks previously respected historical figures and decries the old epics and mythologies of the Indian liberation movement. With the assistance of a self-reflexive narrator, the work frequently reminds readers of its fictitious foundation, aligning it to the notion of metafiction. The story is told in eighteen volumes, and it is based on the Mahabharata. Ved Vyas, the eighty-year-old narrator, dictates his narrative to Ganapathi, his amanuensis.

The novel covers India's pre-independence and post-independence history. It starts with Gandhi's arrival on the political stage with his moral politics and ends with his political successors' degradation. Tharoor draws connections between mythical characters and historical figures to chart the evolution of Indian culture and the formation of the Indian nation. In an interview with Geeta Pandey, he explains why he chose the Mahabharata as the basis for his book. Tharoor admits that he based his book on the Mahabharata because he believed it was a secular narrative with intriguing characters that reflected human flaws like hostility, jealously, greed, and deceit.

Tharoor tells a fictitious narrative of the slaughter in Jallianwala Bagh. Bibigarh Gardens massacre is a reference to the Kanpur tragedy during the Indian revolt of 1857. In Kanpur, company personnel and civilians were seized and slaughtered, including British men, women, and children. Unarmed Indian men, women, and children were among the victims of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre.

Tharoor tries to persuade us that violence against innocent people, regardless of their ethnicity, is inhumane.

The annexation of Hastinapur has sparked outrage and resentment among the Indian people. Ganga Datta chooses to speak at the Bibigarh Gardens' public assembly. As a consequence, tens of thousands of men, women, and children congregate in the Gardens to await the arrival of Ganga Datta. Sir Richard immediately resolves to put a halt to the gathering and selects Colonel Rudyard to carry it out. Colonel Rudyard represents General Dyer, the man responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh atrocity. General Dyer was also known as "a man who rescued India," according to British Nobel Laureate Rudyard Kipling. Colonel Rudyard instructs his troops to open fire on a peaceful, unarmed throng that is ignorant of the impending catastrophe. They are unable to leave the Gardens due to the tight alleys. A cold-blooded slaughter murders 379 people and injures over 1137 more. The most startling aspect of the tragedy is that Rudyard wins praise from the House of Lords in England for his actions. In an endeavor to civilize an allegedly uncultured race, the self-proclaimed civilized race engages in the most uncivilized behavior. The narrator makes an excellent point:

he just acted in the way dictated by the simple logic of colonialism, under which the rules of humanity applied only to the rulers, for the rulers were the people and the people were objects. Objects to be controlled, disciplined, kept in their place and taught lessons like so many animals… …the massacre was no act of insane frenzy but a conscious, deliberate imposition of colonial will. (80-81)

The Bibigarh tragedy causes people to lose trust in the British Empire's intentions, and Gangaji adopts a means to fight his foe. He boldly recommends that the weapons of nonviolence and truth be used to fight for liberation. The slaughter aids in the unification of the divided people into a single country. Having a common adversary is one of the requirements for the formation of a country. The atrocity identifies the British Raj as the common adversary of Indians. As a consequence, the Quit India movement, led by Gangaji, began to take form.

Ganga Datta uses the tools of truth-force and non-cooperation to combat the exploitative British authority. He must devise effective strategies for combating an oppressive colonial policy. Budge Budge hamlet in Bengal, on the banks of the Hooghly River, becomes a battleground when Jute mill employees demand a salary increase, which Scottish mill owners deny, and the workers are locked out. Ved Vyas expresses his dissatisfaction with India's poor economic and social situation as a result of colonial ideology. He tells the story of India's magnificent history, which was tainted by greedy colonial powers. He claims that India's current poverty

is the consequence of colonial exploitation of the riches that India formerly had. It is reasonable to assume that the British East India Company did not sail to a nation where people were poor and miserable. In quest of money and profit, the British invaded India and seized the country's rich and affluent past.

The mill owners in the United Kingdom are now denying the employees' meager salary demands. Ganga Datta is once again standing up for their cause, this time starving until death until the employees get a 35 percent salary increase. Ganga Datta is leading the movement, which is backed up by Sara Moore, a humanitarian sister of a Jute mill owner. Another effective manner by which British authority is rendered ineffectual is Ganga Datta's promise to fast unto death for the sake of justice. The governor of Bengal instructs the Budge Budge mill owners' association to accede to the employees' requests. "The greatest way to bring his ideas to life was, strangely, by being willing to die for them, Ganga Datta discovers in this protest" (105). Fasting is a type of protest popularised by Indian nationalism, and it has been shown to be more successful than agitations, boycotts, and bombings. Tharoor also emphasizes the spiritual significance of fasting. In India, women starve themselves on specific days of the week to get moral credit by denying themselves their favorite delicacies. Her sacrifice is valued by Indian women, but not by Indian men. Fasting, however, has lost its significance and impact in India's modern politics since its goal has been lost.

Tharoor shares the postmodernist viewpoint that history suppresses the voices of the oppressed. History is often a metanarrative that documents the big events in the lives of the leaders who amass power at a certain period in history. History is portrayed as if it were a stage play, with the deeds of a single hero being highlighted while the contributions of others thought to be impoverished are minimized. In his account of India's liberation fight, Tharoor emphasizes this element of history. His narrator confesses:

So it is, Ganapathi, that in this memoir we light up one corner of our collective past at a time, focus on one man's actions, one village's passions, one colonel's duty but all the while life is going on elsewhere, Ganapathi: as the shots ring out in the Bibigarh Gardens, babies are being born, nationalists are being thrown into prison, husbands are quarreling with wives, petitions are being filed in courtrooms, stones are being flung at policemen, and diligent young Indian students are sailing to London to sit for the examinations that will permit them to rule their own people in the name of an alien king. (109 -110)

India, being a varied country, has always reflected a diversity of viewpoints. The Indian country is known for its unity, despite differences in beliefs, attitudes,

and ways of thinking. Dhritarashtra and Pandu, Gangaji's nephews, metaphorically portraying Nehru and Bose, approach and achieve their joint goal of Indian independence in different ways. In his formative years in England, Dhritarashtra embraces socialist beliefs and believes that equality and justice are fundamental human rights. He just overlooks the difficulties of putting socialist principles into practice in a country that is so large in both geographical and sociological terms and is governed by a foreign authority. Gandhi undoubtedly endorses Nehru's law-abiding peaceful progressive approach. Bose, on the other side, wants to take a tougher stance against the British. He advocates for making our mistrust and aversion to British rule more obvious. When he advises that the Prince of Wales' welcoming ceremony be boycotted, however, he is simply ignored. Bose advises the Congress working committee against attending the Round Table Conference in London because he believes it would be futile, but the working committee, at Nehru's request, sends Gandhi as the party's lone delegate. As a consequence, Bose eventually loses trust in the Congress Party's democratic approach and honesty. Tharoor almost persuades his audience to tolerate skepticism and variety. Truth, justice, and dharma are all very subjective concepts, particularly in India.

Conclusion

Thus, the novel reflects India's current image, with its different political perspectives, ideologies, socioeconomic realities, and interpretations of its secular values. It has been noticed that in the areas of society and politics, some power structures attempt to minimize the views of people who lack authority. As a result, it emphasizes the functioning of oppressive discourses within the contexts of class, caste, and gender. It finds that in the Indian setting, language, religion, and ethnicity do not function as unifying elements, but rather as drivers of divisiveness. India as a country is united by a feeling of belonging, a legacy of tolerance, and a culture of assimilation.

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