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Postcolonialism and Literary Theory: Decentring Empire and Recentring India in Shashi Tharoor's Selected Writings

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's selected non-fictional writings offer significant interventions in the interpretation of colonial history, Indian identity, nationalism, democracy, religion, caste, and social justice. This paper examines *Inglorious Empire: What the British Did to India*, *The Hindu Way: An Introduction to Hinduism*, *The Battle of Belonging: On Nationalism, Patriotism, and What It Means to Be Indian*, *The Struggle for India's Soul: Nationalism and the Fate of Democracy*, and *Ambedkar: A Life* through the theoretical framework of postcolonialism and literary theory. Drawing upon the critical perspectives of Edward Said, Frantz Fanon, Homi K. Bhabha, and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, the study investigates how Tharoor interrogates colonial representations and reclaims Indian historical, cultural, and political agency. *Inglorious Empire* challenges imperial narratives by exposing the economic and political consequences of British colonialism, while *The Hindu Way* engages with questions of cultural identity and the representation of Indian traditions. *The Battle of Belonging* and *The Struggle for India's Soul* examine competing ideas of nationalism, citizenship, belonging, pluralism, and democracy. *Ambedkar: A Life* extends the postcolonial discussion towards caste, marginalisation, constitutionalism, and social justice. The paper argues that Tharoor's writings perform a dual movement: they "decentre Empire" by questioning Eurocentric historical narratives and colonial representations, and "recentre India" by foregrounding Indian experiences, traditions, plural identities, democratic values, and marginalised voices. The study concludes that Tharoor's postcolonial intervention is not merely a rejection of colonialism but an attempt to reconstruct an inclusive Indian identity capable of negotiating the continuing legacies of Empire.

Keywords: Postcolonial Nationalism, Cultural Identity, Democracy, Caste, Social Justice.

Postcolonialism, Literary Theory, and the Question of Empire:

Postcolonialism provides the primary theoretical foundation for this study. It examines the cultural, political, historical, and ideological consequences of colonial domination and questions the systems of knowledge through which colonised societies were represented. Edward Said's *Orientalism* is particularly important because it demonstrates how the West constructed representations of the East as exotic, inferior, irrational, and fundamentally different. Such representations enabled colonial

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power to justify its domination. Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonialism further demonstrates that imperial domination operates not only through political control but also through psychological and cultural mechanisms. Homi K. Bhabha complicates the colonial relationship through concepts such as hybridity, ambivalence, and cultural negotiation, while Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak draws attention to the difficulties of representing marginalised and subaltern subjects. These theoretical perspectives are useful for reading Tharoor because his writings repeatedly question who has the authority to narrate India. His project can therefore be understood as a movement from colonial representation to Indian self-representation.

Decentring Empire: Rewriting Colonial History in *Inglorious Empire:*

Tharoor's *Inglorious Empire* is central to the concept of **decentring Empire**. The work reassesses British colonial rule from an Indian perspective and challenges the idea that British imperialism was primarily a civilising project. Tharoor discusses economic exploitation, political domination, the destruction of Indian industries, colonial violence, and the ideological justification of empire. The book explicitly examines subjects including the "Looting of India," political unity, democracy, the press, the parliamentary system, the rule of law, and the "messy afterlife" of colonialism. The postcolonial significance of the work lies in its reversal of the traditional imperial narrative. Instead of asking what Britain supposedly gave India, Tharoor asks what colonialism took from India. Thus, the colonial subject becomes the centre of historical interpretation. The imperial narrative is displaced by an Indian perspective, making *Inglorious Empire* a significant example of postcolonial historical revision.

Recentring Indian Culture: Identity and Tradition in *The Hindu Way:*

The process of recentering India cannot be limited to political independence. It also involves recovering cultural traditions that have frequently been interpreted through Western or colonial categories. In *The Hindu Way*, Tharoor examines Hinduism as a complex intellectual, philosophical, cultural, and religious tradition. His discussion allows the question of Indian cultural identity to be approached beyond simplistic colonial representations. Bhabha's concept of cultural negotiation is particularly useful here. Postcolonial identity is not necessarily pure or fixed; it is produced through encounters between tradition, modernity, colonial influence, and contemporary social realities. Tharoor's engagement with Hinduism can therefore be read as a form of cultural reclamation. At the same time, recentering Indian culture does not require the rejection of plurality. Instead, it raises questions about how Indian traditions can coexist within a diverse and democratic nation. This section therefore establishes an important distinction: recentring India is not the same as replacing colonial dominance with cultural exclusivism.

Nationalism and Belonging in *The Battle of Belonging:*

The question of national identity becomes central in *The Battle of Belonging*. The work examines nationalism, patriotism, citizenship, and the meaning of being Indian. The idea of belonging is particularly important from a postcolonial perspective because colonialism historically defined populations through categories of race, religion, ethnicity, and cultural difference. After independence, the challenge is to create a national identity that is neither colonial nor exclusionary. Tharoor's discussion of Indian nationalism can therefore be examined through the concept of

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postcolonial nationalism. Rather than constructing the nation around a single religious or cultural identity, the text emphasises the complexity of Indian belonging. The work consequently contributes to the recentering of India by asking not simply "Who is Indian?", but also "Who has the right to belong to India?" This makes nationalism a literary and cultural question as much as a political one.

Democracy, Pluralism, and the Struggle for India's Soul:

The Struggle for India's Soul develops Tharoor's discussion of nationalism into a broader examination of democracy and competing visions of India. The work contrasts ethno-religious nationalism with civic nationalism and examines questions of citizenship, pluralism, secularism, and belonging. From a postcolonial perspective, this debate is significant because the construction of the postcolonial nation involves deciding what kind of identity will replace the political structure inherited from colonialism. Tharoor presents Indian identity as plural and democratic rather than homogeneous. His argument can therefore be understood as an attempt to protect the postcolonial nation from new forms of exclusion. The concept of "recentring India" in this context means recovering the values of constitutional democracy, pluralism, secularism, and inclusive citizenship. The struggle after colonialism is consequently not merely between India and the former colonial power; it is also an internal struggle over the meaning and future of the Indian nation.

Caste, Subalternity, and Social Justice in *Ambedkar: A Life:*

Tharoor's *Ambedkar: A Life* expands the meaning of postcolonial liberation by bringing caste and social justice into the discussion. Gayatri Spivak's concept of the subaltern provides a useful theoretical perspective here. Postcolonial studies is concerned not only with the relationship between coloniser and colonised but also with marginalised groups whose voices have been suppressed within dominant social structures. B. R. Ambedkar's life represents a crucial struggle against caste oppression, social exclusion, and structural inequality. By narrating Ambedkar's intellectual and political journey, Tharoor brings questions of caste, constitutional rights, representation, and social justice into his broader understanding of India. This perspective is important because political independence did not automatically eliminate internal systems of oppression. Therefore, decolonisation must include both freedom from external imperial domination and resistance to internal social hierarchies. Through Ambedkar, Tharoor's project of recentering India becomes more inclusive: the centre of the Indian narrative must include not only dominant historical voices but also those who have experienced marginalisation.

Conclusion:

Shashi Tharoor's selected writings demonstrate the continuing significance of postcolonialism and literary theory in understanding contemporary India. Through *Inglorious Empire*, Tharoor challenges imperial historiography and exposes the political and economic consequences of British colonial rule. *The Hindu Way* turns attention towards cultural identity and the interpretation of Indian traditions, while *The Battle of Belonging* examines nationalism, citizenship, and the meaning of Indian identity. *The Struggle for India's Soul* extends these concerns into contemporary debates on democracy, pluralism, secularism, and competing forms of nationalism. *Ambedkar: A Life* further broadens the postcolonial discourse by connecting national liberation with caste

emancipation and social justice. Read through the theoretical insights of Said, Fanon, Bhabha, and Spivak, Tharoor's writings reveal a sustained movement from colonial representation towards Indian self-representation. His work "decentres Empire" by questioning Eurocentric histories, exposing imperial exploitation, and challenging colonial constructions of India. Simultaneously, it "recentres India" by foregrounding Indian historical experience, cultural traditions, democratic ideals, plural identities, and marginalised communities. The study therefore argues that Tharoor's postcolonial project is not simply a rejection of the colonial past. It is an effort to reconstruct the idea of India through historical consciousness, cultural plurality, democratic nationalism, and social justice. His writings ultimately suggest that the achievement of political independence was only one stage in the larger process of decolonisation, and that the continuing task is to imagine an India in which history, identity, democracy, and belonging are defined from within its own diverse experiences.

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