

The Mythification of History and the Historification of Myth: Myth and Mimesis in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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History and myth are inseparable. Indeed, the farther back in time one goes, the more a nation's history becomes entangled with (and inseparable from) myth. In the accompanying paper, I discuss how Rushdie uses myth-making to revision India's history in *Midnight's Children*. However, history can be revisioned by mimesis just as effectively as it can be by myth-making; indeed, to the diasporic mind, mimesis is an essential tool of survival.

Diasporic mimesis takes on two forms. The first is a mimesis of the homeland's myths and traditions, in order to maintain a sense of belonging and identity that is congruent with one's ethnic ancestry. The second is a mimesis of the customs of the new land—the land to which the diasporic individual has traveled. This second form of mimesis is only natural, since geographical displacement (and re-placement) requires a considerable degree of intellectual and emotional adaptation. Thus, the diasporic mind is in a state of perpetual translation, in which both forms of mimesis intercept and merge.

This merging of narratives—native and foreign, familiar and unfamiliar, ancient and new—is the fruitful “Third Space” (Bhabha 74-75) to which Homi Bhabha refers. It is by no means a stable space, being as tumultuous as the merging of Ganga and Yamuna, the two greatest rivers of India. What makes this analogy particularly suited to the diasporic imagination is the fact that the mythical river, Saraswati, is crucial to the merging Ganga and Yamuna. Also known as *Triveni Sangam* or “Union of Three,” this triple knot of rivers—two geographical, one mythical—is also considered a symbol of life (Lane).

The third river—that of myth—is what allows communication and transference between the two halves of the diasporic mind. The Third Space is, in this case, a mythical one—a psychological Saraswati, where story-telling becomes the unifying force between “home” and “abroad.”

Invisible landscapes remain important in the mythologies of all the great religions. Every 12 years at Allahabad in northern India, a great Hindu pilgrimage called the *Triveni* is made to the point at which three sacred rivers converge: the Ganges, the Yamuna and the Saraswati. The third river is the most sacred of all, but it is not to be found on any map. This is a mythical river, having long ago disappeared from the earth, thought now to flow underground, in hidden fields of the spirit. (Lane)

In these “hidden fields of the spirit,” the diasporic writer uses myth as the creative axis that balances displacement and re-placement. Myth is the language that both forms of mimesis can use in order to find voice. Since each mimesis—that of old customs, and recently adopted ones—partakes of the other through the connective tissue of myth, this

Triveni of the mind becomes the creation of a new origin. The history of the homeland is rewritten from this viewpoint, as is the politics of the adoptive nation.

For writers of the diaspora, many of them hailing from former colonies and empires of Europe, home is a problematic site, since the reality of home as well as its imaginative projection are vulnerably linked to an entire network of personal, national, social, and cultural identifications. This vulnerability is crucial. Traditionally the home has served as the site of origin, as a source for a nostalgic understanding of the continuities of private and public self, and a place for recovering or maintaining the stability of this self. However, for the diasporic consciousness, this stability always brushes up against the highly ramified nature of home as it is historically constructed. (Roy 104)

Caught in this dilemma of dual (or even multiple) identities, it is no wonder that diasporic writers prefer historically *deconstructed* origins to “historically constructed” ones. Myth and mimesis—both prime methods of deconstruction—are used time and again in order to map, reorient and reinterpret the concept of home.

Within the specific arena of the decolonised space of nationality, it becomes increasingly clear that such interrelationship lies at the very heart of the possibility for naming and representing home as a mark of postcoloniality. Indeed, the very possibility of representing home determines how the postcolonial consciousness connects the idea of home with history—how it imagines this history and sees itself as a historical “object” as well as “subject” of that history. (Roy 104)

The subjecthood of the diasporic self becomes naturally objectified by distance and time; the longer one is away from the homeland, and the farther away one goes, the more telescoped one’s sense of identity becomes. To revision and absorb one’s past through the mimesis of traditional myths is one of the ways for a diasporic subject to de-objectify itself. This de-objectification of the self is simultaneously a re-appropriation of identity. Instead of being a literal mimesis, it is a creative one; the new identity that emerges from the merging of myth and mimesis is a “postcolonial consciousness,” and one that is aware of its dual narrative.

Shashi Tharoor, like Salman Rushdie, is a diasporic writer preoccupied with this dual narrative. However, he is better known as a diplomat and a political dignitary than he is as a writer; there is relatively little criticism written about his works as compared to, say, Rushdie’s. This is not to say that Tharoor produces less work, or that he belongs to a younger generation. Rather, Tharoor belongs very much to Rushdie’s generation, and has written widely on a range of issues relating to India in both non-fiction and fiction, with thirteen non-fiction books and three novels. Among Tharoor’s novels, *The Great Indian Novel* is an amalgam of Indian history and Indian myth, while *Riot* (2001) is a strictly realist examination of religiously-motivated violence in India. *Show Business* (1992), on the other hand, is a light-hearted if acerbic novel that has also been made into a feature film.

In this paper, I hope to build a theoretical framework within which to place Tharoor’s novels, particularly *The Great Indian Novel*. As a diasporic author who has lived in the United States and has traveled throughout the world, Tharoor’s revisioning of India is especially rich in the postcolonial aesthetic. His use of mythological mimesis is particularly unique, and is an intriguing counterpart to Rushdie’s magical realism, even though it is markedly different in its approach.

The *Mahabharata* is one of the great Indian texts, but it is also a seamless blend of history and myth. Myth is the writer’s tool to revision and reinterpret history, and Tharoor uses

this most trusty of tools to revision India's history. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor re-contextualises the Indian independence movement within the mythological framework of the *Mahabharata*.

Colonial Indian history is replete with instances where Indians arrogated subjecthood to themselves precisely by mobilising, within the context of "modern" institutions and sometimes on behalf of the modernising project of nationalism, devices of collective memory that were both antihistorical and antimodern. (Chakrabarty 340)

It is not only colonial Indian history, but also postcolonial history which is subject to creative re-contextualization. In the above quote, Dipesh Chakrabarty was not discussing diasporic literature in particular, nor was he discussing Shashi Tharoor's work. Nevertheless, his concept of "arrogated subjecthood" holds true for postcolonial diasporic literature, as much as it did for colonial history. Myth is one of the "devices of collective memory" that Indians as have continued to use throughout the centuries. Most recently, myth has become a means for diasporic Indians to connect with their national history, as well as their personal pasts. Tharoor and Rushdie have both used myth in their novels—Rushdie as a myth-maker, and Tharoor as a revisionist. Rushdie's myth-making in *Midnight's Children is fabulist*, and Tharoor's approach to the Indian independence movement is similarly satirical, but instead of creating new myths, Tharoor chooses to tap the rich and already existent vein of Indian mythology, using it as a new focal point with which to analyse Indian politics.

Tharoor's use of the *Mahabharata* can be seen as mimetic, but it is a deliberate mimicry, aimed at a sardonic deconstruction of a young India's misadventures. Lacan's comparison of mimicry and warfare is particularly relevant to Tharoor's revisionism, because political deconstruction is inherently aggressive, especially in a diasporic writer's hands.

Mimicry reveals something in so far as it is distinct from what might be called an itself that is behind. The effect of mimicry is camouflage . . . It is not a question of harmonising with the background, but against a mottled background, of becoming mottled—exactly like the technique of camouflage practiced in human warfare. (Lacan 99)

India's history is mottled, too, and mimesis is one of the most effective means by which a diasporic writer can camouflage his voice. In his book, *India: From Midnight to the Millennium*, Tharoor acknowledges the mottled nature of India's history, and its almost overwhelming multiplicity. As he says, "The only possible idea of India is that of a nation greater than the sum of its parts" (Tharoor, *India* 5). Such a nation, constantly bursting at the seams with its many stories and mythologies, is particularly ripe for a mythical revisioning of its political history.

When speaking of Orientalism, Edward Said made a similar statement about mimetic narrative being "the specific form taken by written history to counter the permanence of vision" (Said 240). The vision Said is referring to is the idea of an unchanging, petrified history.

Against this system of synchronic essentialism I have called vision because it presumes that the whole Orient can be seen panoptically, there is a constant pressure. The source of pressure is narrative, in that if any Oriental detail can be shown to move, or to develop, diachrony is introduced into the system. What seemed stable—and the Orient with stability and unchanging eternality—now appears unstable. Instability suggests that history, with its disruptive detail, its currents of change, its tendency towards growth, decline, or dramatic movement, is possible in the Orient and for the Orient. History and narrative by which

history is represented argue that vision is insufficient, that “the Orient” as an unconditional ontological category does an injustice to the potential reality for change. (Said 240)

The tension between the permanent and the temporary, between the static idea and the ever-evolving reality, is the birthing ground of myth. Diasporic literature, by its very nature, treasures and celebrates instability instead of mourning it. Tharoor, by mimicking and adapting a traditional Hindu myth to suit a modern, cynical narrative, is capitalising on the very instability that fuels Indian history.

[The] double signifies the difficult historical ground in which the postcolonial seeks his or her identity and the impossible distances the self negotiates in order to understand itself as a historical being. In this imagining, the unfamiliar grates against the grains of the familiar, and out of this encounter the profile of the self is born . . . (Roy 112)

This journey towards understanding oneself as a “historical being” is what encapsulates Tharoor’s mimesis. The essential hybridity of the diasporic experience gifts a migrant with “a tongue that is forked, not false” (Bhabha 122). This fork is not merely a literary one, or even an ethnic one; it is an ideological one, enabling the diasporic writer to be more comfortable with the ironic diachrony that Said commented on. The dichotomies of myth and history, of narrative and silence, of dream and reality, of mimesis and originality — these dichotomies are deconstructed by the migrant’s double vision, enabling these apparent opposites to partake of each other, and indeed to become each other.

Diaspora disperses the locations of dwelling into an interstitial habitus. Nomadism is the most attenuated concept in relation to location. Yet even theories of nomadic rhizomes include “nodes” — those sites of intersecting movements or “lines of flight.” (Kaplan 143)

Mythical mimesis is, perhaps, one of the “lines of flight” that the diasporic nomad uses to chart his journeys. In his interview with the BBC, Shashi Tharoor admitted that despite living outside of India for many years, he felt that he had managed to keep in touch with Indian concerns. Indeed, living abroad had given him a new appreciation of India’s pluralism, and of how “India has been able to maintain a consensus on how to do without a consensus” (Tharoor, *Talking Point*). The multiple voices of *The Great Indian Novel*, embodying mythical characters as well as more recent political ones, celebrates this consensus-beyond-consensus. The sometimes dramatic, sometimes humorous mimesis of the *Mahabharata* in Tharoor’s novel forms a powerful subversive narrative, that remains celebratory despite (or perhaps even because) of its subversion. By producing a text “rich in the traditions of *trompe-l’œil*, irony, mimicry and repetition,” Tharoor confirms Bhabha’s statement that mimicry is “one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge” (Bhabha 122).

Of course, Bhabha’s mimesis was a mimicry of the colonisers by the colonised, but it is just as effective when employed by a diasporic writer on the history and mythology of his own country. By injecting myth into history, Tharoor fosters an intellectual and moral uncertainty that prompts the reader to re-think the events leading up to and following India’s independence.

Before continuing to analyse Tharoor’s diasporic narrative, I should provide a brief guide to the mimetic structure of *The Great Indian Novel*. In Tharoor’s novel, each major political player in India’s independence has a parallel character from the *Mahabharata*. The novel’s scribe, Ganapathi, is the only one who remains beyond the call of history; he symbolises the invisible voice of Ganesha, god of literature and teller of tales. That Tharoor

should borrow Ganesha's voice as his own is in itself a satirical mimesis, because far from imbuing the narrative with a godlike objectivity, Tharoor never fails to remind the reader of history's essential plurality, and of the unreliability of any scribe, no matter how divine.

This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganapathi. Every Indian must forever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* ch. 1)

This disclaimer is reminiscent of Rusdhie's broken mirror (Rusdhie 429), and of the uniquely diasporic awareness of a multiple centre. (Or, rather, an omnipresent one—a different focal point for every Indian, both in and out of India.) In his introduction to *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor makes a more explicit acknowledgment of his own subjectivity:

In the pages that follow I embark upon a sweeping and highly personalised examination of contemporary India . . . This book is not a survey of modern Indian history, though it touches upon many of the principal events of the last five decades. It is not "reportage," though I do draw anecdotally upon my own travels and conversations in India. It is instead a subjective account, I hope both informed and impassioned, of the forces that have made (and nearly unmade) today's India, and about the India that I hope my sons will inherit in the second half-century after independence. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* intr.)

Tharoor's choice of Ganapathi as the novel's scribe now makes sense. Ganapathi is the scribe of Ved Vyas, the narrator, who simultaneously embodies his namesake in the *Mahabharata* (the father of Dhritarashtra and Pandu) as well as the historical figure of Rajagopalachari. This three-way characterization can be found throughout the novel. Gangaji, for example, embodies both Bhishma (from the *Mahabharata*) and Mohandas Gandhi (from India's own history). The Congress split is represented by "the fratricidal war between Kauravas and Pandavas" (Gupta 304). Priya Duryodhani takes on the role of Duryodhana, one of the Kauravas, and the instigator of the war against the Pandavas. Interestingly enough, Duryodhani is also the fictional equivalent of Indira Gandhi, and is portrayed as a dictator. The character of Draupadi Moksari symbolises Indian democracy, and, like the Draupadi of the *Mahabharata*, is stripped and humiliated by Duryodhana (Indira Gandhi). By creating these parallels, Tharoor is "able simultaneously to allegorise the story of modern India in terms of the epic *Mahabharata* and to question the very notion of using the authority of tradition to offer certitudes in the seeming chaos of the present" (Rege 172).

This stunningly complex interplay of myth and history lends Tharoor's narrative its power. Jawaharlal Nehru is cast as Dhritarashtra, the blind king, because of his blind idealism and optimism. Morjari Desai, India's fourth prime minister, was as pure-hearted as he was ineffectual; he is cast as Yudhishtir. Indeed, Desai's ineffectuality is brought into merciless light by Tharoor's casting, especially given Draupadi chastising words in the *Mahabharata*, as translated below by Amartya Sen:

If you choose to reject heroic action
and see forbearance as the road to future happiness,
then throw away your bow, the symbol of royalty,
wear your hair matted in knots,
stay here and make offerings in the sacred fire! (Sen 9)

Draupadi criticises Yudhishtir, her husband, for remaining a hermit in the forest, and for refusing to fight to defend his honour (and, by implication, hers). This exchange, bitter and recriminating as it is, becomes ironic in the light of *The Great Indian Novel*. Since Draupadi symbolises democracy, Morjari Desai's inability to protect it is equated to Yudhishtir's emasculation.

In the looking glass of myth, history's face becomes more human. Accessibility and subjectivity bring life to otherwise distant facts. Decades after independence, the failures and inefficacies of various politicians are revived and examined by the invigorating power of myth. The *Mahabharata*, being a text well-known among Indians and even among non-Indians, is an excellent source for this invigorating power. Tharoor explodes the stiff and petrified canvas of history by painting it in ancient colours—colours of myth recognizable to any Indian.

[G]eographically displaced, cast in the form of a transnational figure, the diasporic artist occupies this dual site with an unstable equanimity. The knowledge of the colonial language—English—has historically offered places of privilege for the national bourgeoisie, and this privilege is the historical effect of colonialism. In fact, middle-class appropriation of the other tongue is in many ways an appropriation of that “other's” mastery. However, the diasporic individual, thrown into the reality of transnational hyphenation, is capable of rendering her “song” into “politics.” [. . .] This recognition of ethnicity is the mark of the historicity of the postcolonial subject and its consciousness of the differentiations created by this history; it is not a fixed and given identity that is reiterated with the universal abandon of a modernist angst. (Roy 113)

Since Tharoor also occupies the territory of “transnational hyphenation,” he uses the language of the coloniser—English—to retell the myths of the colonised. It is not, however, a negation of the original myth to retell it in another language; in fact it can be understood as a reverse colonization, in which the myths of the homeland appropriate and subvert the colonial narrative. This hyphenation is not an inequation; in the postcolonial context, the syntax of mastery is re-making itself into a syntax of hybridity. An example would be the following statement by Ved Vyas, the narrator of Tharoor's novel:

Some of our more Manichean historians tend to depict the British villains as supremely accomplished—the omniscient, omnipresent, omnipotent manipulators of the destiny of India. Stuff and nonsense, of course. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 116)

In obviously British language, Tharoor slyly subverts the British Raj. The joke is, of course, a double-edged sword; it uses the language of the coloniser against the coloniser, and the risk of this strategy proving ineffective is very high. However, what makes it effective in Tharoor's case is the injection of a very Indian myth into the English syntax. When describing the cataclysmic election of 1977, for example, the narrator of Tharoor's novel compares it to the battle of Kurukshetra:

Life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between Dharma and adharmā is a struggle our nation, and each one in it, engages in on every single day of our existence. That struggle, that battle, took place before this election; it will continue after it. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 391)

As a diasporic writer, Tharoor can bring the mammoth weight of Indian myth and archetypal signifiers to bear against the pressure of a colonial, English narrative. And yet, instead of causing fissures or cracks in the narrative, the clash of these two giants becomes a union; one that subverts both sides of the argument, and celebrates the hybridity

of the postcolonial narrative. The internal and the external become indivisible after re-absorbing each other through the osmotic layer of mythical mimesis; the postcolonial and the colonial are similarly deconstructed.

Tharoor's mimesis is a postmodern reawakening of Said's diachrony. This diachrony is kin to Fanon's "zone of occult instability" (Fanon 168), a creative and revolutionary instability fueled by deconstructive mimesis. From a colonial point of view, this mimesis is targeted at the colonisers by the colonised—at the ruling few by the many subalterns. What makes Tharoor's mimesis postmodern is that it is directed at his own country, and at his own country's past—not at the ruling few by the many subalterns, but rather at the root by its many offshoots. Moreover, the mimesis itself takes the form of a great Indian myth, which Tharoor then transforms into *The Great Indian Novel*. Tharoor's right to practice such a mimesis may be challenged by those Indian critics who consider diasporic writers outsiders, no longer capable of speaking for or about India.

One such critic is Makarand Paranjape, who accuses diasporic writers of debasing India abroad. Certainly, many diasporic authors, such as Rusdhie and Tharoor, portray India as a less than ideal state. But does their non-resident status immediately invalidate them as commentators on India, and on its history? Paranjape certainly thinks so.

The dirty job of India bashing need no longer be performed by a white man; non-resident Indians will do it equally well, if not better. The demand for such "insiders" who are actually outsiders is truly so great in the West that India turns out to be the only marketable commodity they have as writers. The position of such diasporics is akin to that of African middlemen who sold slaves to the white traders. [...] In short, from being underprivileged, unwanted, insecure, marginalised, denationalised and faceless, such diasporics have suddenly begun to loom large over us [resident Indians], clouding our own independent access to the world and the world's unhampered assessment of our lives. (Paranjape 239-240)

It is fascinating that, in his disavowal of diasporic narratives, Paranjape has revealed precisely *why* the diasporic writer can also be considered a subaltern—a postmodern subaltern, but very much of one, nonetheless. As Paranjape admits, diasporic authors are often "marginalised," and his comments themselves are a kind of marginalization. From this perspective, it becomes understandable that a diasporic author such as Shashi Tharoor would choose mimesis as a creative tool. Perhaps it is true that "India seen from afar can never be the same as India seen from close up" (Paranjape 240), but this cultural parallax may be an advantage when understanding (or attempting to understand) a pluralistic India. When speaking of *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor responded to the question of plurality, diasporic hybridity and Indianness:

This book is a paean to India, yet it emanates from the pen of a United Nations official who has lived outside India for most of his adult life. I am, indeed, often asked how I can reconcile my passionate faith in India with my internationalist work for the United Nations. I see no contradiction; indeed, both emerge from the same pluralist convictions. The Indian adventure is that of human beings of different ethnicities and religions, customs and costumes, cuisines and colours, languages and accents, working together under the same roof, sharing the same dreams. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* intr.)

The diasporic writer may be no more invalidated by his or her perceived Otherness than a flower is invalidated by being transplanted into a foreign climate. Distance—to the homeland, or away from it—is better mapped by empathy than it is by miles. It is the lack of empathy for one's subjects, and a callous disregard for them, that invalidates a writer's work; therefore, it is the enduring passion of the Indian diaspora for India that

validates its work. This passion for India, which is also “the passion of the origin” (Derrida 373), is in a sense self-validating, but it is this very self-validation that inspires Paranjape’s doubt. When one views oneself as standing at the nexus, at the origin, then the views of all others become naturally displaced. This might appear to be a facile or even childish declaration, but aesthetic displacement is a contentious issue, and it is difficult to make any statement at all without seeming facile. Indeed, what is displacement, and where does the nexus of art reside? For a deconstructionist, or for a diasporic writer such as Tharoor, the answer is obvious: the nexus can be found under every stone, if one has the eyes to see it. But is this, too, an over-simplification?

Art, despite its conscious or unconscious embeddedness in historical processes and its obscure physiological provenance, points to an intelligibility we have not understood. How does art convert learning or information into a vital tradition, what Wordsworth called “the breath and finer spirit of all knowledge,” unless it is by getting “the closest fix on the mystery of sensation” (Lyotard), and waking a sort of soul in sense, or even sense itself? (Hartman 226)

The confusion that infects any debate of literary authenticity is caused by this very issue. Myth and history would be easier to deal with if they weren’t inseparable; artists and writers need not be charged with inauthenticity if art did not itself partake of historicity (and vice versa). But since it *does*, the artist immediately becomes responsible—or, at the very least, accountable—for his or her portrayal of history. Tharoor’s mythical mimesis is a deliberate historicization of art, and critics like Paranjape take issue with it precisely because Tharoor, as a diasporic writer, no longer has “the closest fix” on India’s history. That is to say, Tharoor’s physical distance from India is seen as a creative and psychological encumbrance. I would argue, however, that mythology is the “vital tradition” that enables a diasporic writer to connect with the homeland—and that, by using an Indian myth to reconnect with India, Tharoor has arrogated his subjecthood as an Indian (Chakrabarty 340).

Paranjape is not the only academic who has doubts about Tharoor’s authenticity; another critical observer is Kanishka Chowdhury. In her essay, “Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor’s Great Indian Novel,” Chowdhury raises concerns similar to Paranjape’s:

[P]ostcolonial writers, such as Tharoor, are themselves the victims of divided allegiances and ambivalent loyalties: their class position among largely illiterate populations, the material and discursive attractions of metropolitan centres, and the lure of recognition and publication offers from London and New York, among other factors, contribute to their unavoidable involvement in Western cultural systems. Said, Fanon, and Ashcroft, in their urgency to celebrate the recovery of the “national” or “native” voice, avoid highlighting the inevitable contradictions that must accompany any process of cultural recovery. An attempt to recover a “national” past is necessarily exclusive and can only succeed by eliminating other oppositional voices. (Chowdhury 41)

Chowdhury neglects to mention that “cultural recovery” is not only *transcultural* recovery. Indeed, any act of reconnecting with one’s national past, whether one is a resident or a non-resident, is an act of cultural recovery. As such, the exclusivity, incompleteness and subjectivity of revisioning history is not applicable to postcolonial diaspora alone; it is equally applicable to any individual, in any time or place, who is seeking to recover his or her past. In recovering their memories of the Holocaust, for example, each Jewish individual’s journey will be highly subjective and personal; this exclusivity does not, however, render it inauthentic (Hartman 226).

The India to which Tharoor refers is seen through his eyes—narrow eyes that largely ignore the plight of the vast underclass for whom independence merely suggested a ceremonial shift in power. In a sense, Tharoor’s project of writing back to the centre sadly enacts the erasure of the subaltern or the underclass. (Chowdhury 43)

I would agree with Chowdhury insofar as the “narrowness” of Tharoor’s perspective is concerned; the gaze of any writer is, after all, narrow in the sense that it cannot express or borrow from the gaze of any other person. However, I would disagree with her assumption about the nature of Tharoor’s creative goals. Tharoor’s project is not writing *back* to the centre, but rather *around* it. If anything, his “project” is a personal reclamation of diasporic identity, in which myth and mimesis create a circular structure around India’s past. The peculiarity of this gaze—glancing away and then towards—creates an intellectual parallax that resembles the dual identity of the diasporic mind.

Despite its name, *The Great Indian Novel* is not an authoritative or even a nationalistic text; the title (and, indeed, the tone) of the novel is sardonic. It is a diasporic text, and as such is not preoccupied with writing back to the centre at all, even though that might appear to be the surface goal. Instead, Tharoor writes back and then *away*; the text mimics the journey of Tharoor himself, both as a diasporic individual and as a diplomat. The Hindu ritual of *parikrama*, for example, is the circling of a holy place in order to pay homage to it, without ever approaching it directly (Nelson 252-254). Tharoor’s novel is one such *parikrama*, albeit a postmodern one with decidedly subversive motives. It is true that *The Great Indian Novel* does not focus on “the plight of the vast underclass,” but this shift of focus is part of Tharoor’s mythological mimesis, and by no means an “erasure of the subaltern.” The *Mahabharata* itself had, as its focus, the war between the ruling families of the Kauravas and the Pandavas; in adapting this story to modern India, Tharoor naturally depicted the political conflict between India’s leaders. It is also doubtful that most Indians, including those in the subaltern, would view the independence of their country as a mere “ceremonial shift in power.” The harsh practicalities of everyday life existed before and after independence, but the symbolic value of freedom in itself was immense. Had the “vast underclass” perceived independence as nothing but a shift in power, Gandhi would not have been able to spark such a mass revolution among, within and by the subaltern. Tharoor’s depiction of this freedom struggle is wry and often irrelevant, but the very fact that he uses it as a mimetic focal point emphasises its importance—to all Indians, be they subaltern or diasporic.

Unlike Paranjape, Chowdhury eventually acknowledges that “Tharoor’s work, despite all its contradictions and failures, creates a postcolonial space which celebrates the possibilities of revisioning colonialist knowledge” (Chowdhury 47). She goes on to say that:

The battle between the centre’s imposition of discursive restrictions on the postcolonial writer and the writer’s creative efforts to break free from this imposition will continue. And writers such as Shashi Tharoor will be caught between the contradictions of their class position and their efforts to “redraw” frontiers and rewrite histories. They are trapped in an inevitable predicament: even as they attempt to challenge the hegemonic entailments of metropolitan culture, they simultaneously renew their cultural contract with the metropolis. However, despite their inevitable complicity in past and contemporary systems of colonialist knowledge, writers like Tharoor succeed insofar as they provide a corrective for the epistemic violence of the European colonisers. (Chowdhury 47)

This might appear to be a significant compromise, but the language of Chowdhury’s otherwise balanced assessment is still that of colonial loyalism versus postcolonial

hybridity. This is, in itself, a quiet form of “epistemic violence,” which undermines the authenticity of the postcolonial diaspora. By using the word “complicity,” Chowdhury is immediately casting the diasporic writer in as the traitorous Other; or, perhaps even more condemningly, as the traitorous Self. This language would not be out of place if commenting on a colonial text written during colonial times; but in a postcolonial context, this Othering of the diaspora is more regressive than progressive. Tharoor’s dual mimesis understandably invites such scepticism, because it makes very obvious use of apparently oppositional dialectics. The point that Chowdhury and Paranjape both miss, however, is that for a diasporic individual, these dialectics are *not* oppositional; they are often contradictory, but they are not oppositional. They cannot be oppositional, simply because they are inseparable. The *Triveni* of traditional myth, Western language and personal mimesis deconstructs the binary opposites of “colonial” and “postcolonial,” and brings forth a Third Space that is hybrid rather than compartmentalised. The fragments of Rushdie’s broken mirror repair themselves through the power of myth; in Tharoor’s case, mimesis is the adhesive agent that unifies myth and history. What Paranjape’s—and, to a lesser extent, Chowdhury’s—approach represents is a view based on colonial binaries rather than postcolonial deconstruction. As a result, the hybrid nature of diasporic literature may appear to be a kind of “complicity” to them.

Mimesis has been called into doubt from the earliest days of artistic endeavor; Plato exiled poets from his ideal city, precisely because he believed that their mimicry of the Forms invalidated them (Plato, *The Republic* Book II, 390a8-b4). The distance between the Form and the imitation is not unlike the distance Paranjape places between India and the diaspora. Tharoor’s metamythical storytelling is doubly mimetic, distanced as it is by time (history) and space (diasporic displacement). The question that remains is whether mimesis in itself invalidates a writer, or whether it validates the text precisely by eschewing any claim to objective authority.

Art becomes a crucial battleground for two reasons. It stands at the beginning of mankind’s desire to create simulacra, the question always remaining: simulacra of what and for what purpose? Moreover, art does not disappear into what it represents. As a medium with its own mode of being, it maintains a distance between itself and that reality. This very distance, intrinsic to its reflective power, makes art a doubtful agency in any pressing conflict. We often fall back, therefore, on praising art as special medium among media—something that mimes the rich, neglected materiality of things. As such, it revives traces of a half-forgotten intensity of perception . . . (Hartman 227)

In the above quote, Geoffrey Hartman is in fact talking about the artistic depiction of the Holocaust. Nevertheless, the points he makes are relevant for the depiction of any era of historic upheaval. Tharoor creates a “simulacrum” of post-independence India that may very well contain the “epistemic distortions” (Paranjape 240) of a diasporic gaze. Of course, any simulacrum whatsoever is bound to contain distortions, but I would say that it is this self-conscious subjectivity which both rescues art from the debate of authenticity, and validates it as a form of expression. Mimesis is not only the passive reacquaintance, within one’s mind, of “the rich, neglected materiality of things.” Instead, it is an active and even aggressive appropriation and revisioning of data—be it history, myth or language itself. Children learn to speak through mimesis (Donald 44-47); so does the diasporic writer learn of India through creative mimesis. Validity and authenticity are not binary states, nor are they binary switches within a cultural circuit, with only two possible positions of *on* and *off*. Being in or out of India is not what determines a diasporic

artist's authenticity; it is the artwork itself, and its worth as a mimetic object that makes a self-conscious, reflective and enlightening use of mimesis.

Paranjape claims that the diasporic writer's work is more likely to be distorted because of the writer's "marginalization," but marginalization is a phenomenon that effects minorities everywhere, both within India and outside of it. Tharoor's article in *The New York Times* emphasises this universal marginalization:

We are all minorities in India. A typical Indian stepping off a train, a Hindi-speaking Hindu man from the Gangetic plain state of Uttar Pradesh, might cherish the illusion that he represents the "majority community," to use an expression much favored by the less industrious of our journalists. But he does not. As a Hindu he belongs to the faith adhered to by some 82 percent of the population, but a majority of the country does not speak Hindi, a majority does not hail from Uttar Pradesh, and if he were visiting, say, the state of Kerala, he would discover that a majority there is not even male.

Worse, this archetypal Hindu has only to mingle with the polyglot, polychrome crowds thronging any of India's main railway stations to realise how much of a minority he really is. Even his Hinduism is no guarantee of majorityhood, because his caste automatically places him in a minority as well. If he is a Brahmin, 90 percent of his fellow Indians are not; if he is a Yadav (one of the intermediate castes), 85 percent of Indians are not, and so on. (Tharoor, "India's Odd, Enduring Patchwork")

In short, Paranjape's claim of native authenticity is dangerously Orwellian in its belief that all Indians are equal, but some Indians are more equal than others. (The "more equal" ones being those still living in India, as opposed to those who have left it due to choice or circumstance.) The Otherness of being a diasporic Indian has, if anything, made Tharoor more conscious of the many Others within India; this lends his work an authenticity that is more empathic in nature than it is ideological. There is no convenient, binary measure of validity; there is no switch between the authentic and the inauthentic. Instead, there is a spectrum of belonging on which writers—diasporic or otherwise—can situate themselves.

Mimesis has been traditionally understood as the weapon of the colonial subaltern—but in postcolonial times, it has also become a tool of recollection for members of the diaspora. *The Great Indian Novel* is testament to the use of mimesis as aesthetic historicization, wherein the diasporic writer revises and mimics mythological characters. By plumbing the depths of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor has successfully situate himself as the invisible scribe, Ganapathi, and has contextualised Indian history within a system of mythical allegory.

The transition narrative will always remain grievously incomplete. On the other hand, maneuvers are made within the space of the mimetic—and therefore within the project called "Indian" history—to represent the "difference" and the "originality" of the "Indian," and it is in this cause that the antihistorical devices of memory and the antihistorical "histories" of the subaltern classes are appropriated. Thus peasant/worker constructions of "mythical" kingdoms and "mythical" pasts/futures find a place in texts designated "Indian" history precisely through a procedure that subordinates these narratives to the rules of evidence and to the secular, linear calendar that the writing of "history" must follow (Chakrabarty 340).

Dipesh Chakrabarty does not include the marginalised, diasporic individual in his definition of the subaltern. As Spivak would say, the diasporic individual may not be "a

true subaltern" (Spivak 35), but as we have just seen, members of the diaspora do struggle with claims of (in)authenticity and voicelessness. In this sense, Tharoor's use of myth can be seen as a maneuver made "within the space of the mimetic," where the *Mahabharata* is used as an "antihistorical device." Ironically, the diasporic perspective places Chakrabarty's concept of a "secular, linear calendar" (that of Western colonial powers) squarely back in the hands of resident Indians, particularly historical purists like Paranjape. A diasporic writer is interrogated by "the rules of evidence," much like subaltern speakers are/were interrogated by Western canon. This is a rather perverse parallel to draw attention to, but it does place Tharoor's work within the mimetic tradition. The diasporic experience is now a global phenomenon, and mimesis has likewise expanded to fulfill the needs of postcolonial minorities abroad. The following quote, taken from one of Tharoor's articles in *Newsweek*, is a particularly poignant reflection on the diasporic condition.

New York cabbies love to tell their life stories—how they came to America, usually on a tourist visa they've long overstayed, and how they live six to a room so they can send the bulk of their earnings home. Pakistani cabbies are particularly generous, in the experience of this Indian, often refusing my fare with the comment, "You are a brother." Of course, this gesture only prompts me to give a larger tip, but it speaks of a solidarity of the displaced, two Subcontinentals in a foreign land, drawn together in the shared space of a New York cab (Tharoor, "Is That Brooklyneese or Bengali?").

The "solidarity of the displaced" is nothing less than the diasporic need for a *re*-placement—not in the sense of finding a substitute place of belonging, but rather of placing oneself within an already existent landscape—the psychological landscape of one's homeland. The cab driver's urge to communicate his personal history is, in a sense, also the diasporic writer's urge to create. Both forms of communication are contextualizations—placing the individual in a larger network of interweaving myths, ideas and belongings. Story-telling and mimesis are essential to the diasporic consciousness, and to its creative force.

The dust of history never settles. Stirred by the feet of passers by, it cycles between myth and memory. To diasporic writers, mimesis becomes not only a kind of remembrance, but also an active participation in the revisioning of their homeland's history.

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