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**Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of  
Shashi Tharoor**

John Skinner

## Contents

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<b>Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor</b> . . . . .	6
Abstract . . . . .	6
1. The great Indian novelist . . . . .	8
2. Show business; or, all the world's a screen . . . . .	13
3. A well-crafted riot . . . . .	20
Works cited . . . . .	36
Notes . . . . .	38

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

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### Abstract

Shashi Tharoor is remarkable for a sequence of three fictions which subvert a number of paradigms commonly linked with postcolonial writing or the New Literatures in English, even as they transcend the boundaries of the classic realist novel. His first work, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), while owing a literary debt to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, may also be the most virtuoso reworking of an epic model -in this case, the *Mahabharata*- yet produced in English. His second novel, *Show Business* (1991), with its light-hearted satire of the Bollywood film industry, is also a more trenchant indictment of corruption in Indian public life. *Riot* (2001), finally, is a study of an East-West cultural clash against the backdrop of the communal disturbances following the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992. On the basis of brief

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

analysis of all three novels, an attempt is made to position the author in cultural and literary terms. Tharoor's personal standpoint is, however, more explicit than most contemporary writers'. A social and political ideology is clearly articulated in his important essay collection, *India: From Midnight to the Millenium* (1997), and this work is therefore read in close conjunction with the novels.

**S**hashi Tharoor's second novel, *Show Business*, has a single explicit, if ironic, reference to "postcolonialism", when the protagonist's old schoolfriend –now a rather lecherous *guru*– complains of the barbarism of monogamy imposed by India's former British rulers. It is initially no easier to find clear postcolonial themes in Tharoor's other fiction, either. But the rubric New Literatures in English -if it merely suggests modern offshoots of a metropolitan tradition- also begs several questions, when the structure of Tharoor's three novels to date is related to such ancient and/or esoteric models as the *Mahabharata*, the Sanskrit *Nāṭyaśāstra* and Hindi-language Bollywood cinema, respectively. The more local category of "Indian literature in English" seems a safer bet. Much of the present essay is, in fact, concerned with *positioning* of Shashi Tharoor: the ambivalence between the active and passive senses of the term is intentional, since Tharoor is not only to be classified in literary terms, but must be read for his personal position or agenda which is often revealed with

considerable candour. In view of the scant critical attention hitherto received by such a significant writer, moreover, the essay discusses all three of Tharoor's novels to date, while also drawing on his seminal non-fictional work, *India: From Midnight to the Millenium* -hereafter *Midnight*.

### **1. The great Indian novelist**

Born in London, raised in Bombay and Calcutta, educated in India and the United States, Tharoor later worked for the United Nations in Geneva. He is currently Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information with the same body in New York; in the Acknowledgements to *Midnight* – in the light of his more official public position – he actually describes his fiction writing as “literary moonlighting”. An alumnus of the Jesuit-run Campion College in Bombay and graduate of Delhi's prestigious St Stephen's College, he completed postgraduate studies with a doctorate from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts. As opposed to many “postcolonial” writers, then, Tharoor's education and subsequent career ensure that links with Britain, the old colonial “centre”, are marginal. His natural external frame of reference is less Britain, the great imperial power of the nineteenth century, than the United States, its (neo)-imperial successor of the late twentieth and early twenty-first.

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

The most direct postcolonial critique actually occurs in *Midnight*, where Tharoor writes scathingly of “[l]earned British econometricians” who have tried to show that the net result of British rule in India was neutral and that “the British put about as much into India as they took out” (1998:14). The debit side of his own balance sheet certainly belies this:

Economic exploitation (often undisguised looting of everything from raw material to jewels); stunting of indigenous industry (symbolised by the deliberate barbarity with which, on at least two occasions, the British ordered the thumbs of whole communities of Indian weavers cut off so they could not compete with the products of Lancashire); the creation of a landless peasantry (through land settlement acts that vested land ownership in a coplaisant squirearchy of zamindars created by the British to maintain rural order); and general poverty, hunger and underdevelopment (14).

And with regard to what is usually placed on the credit side, moreover, Tharoor notes that even the more useful British institutions and facilities - from railways, post and telegraph to the English language itself- were also instruments of imperialism, intended to perpetuate British rule. As for the alleged benefits of political unity, imposed to a degree India had not known for centuries, Tharoor has even stronger reservations: following the old Roman maxim of *divide et impera*, Britain also fostered a “particularist consciousness” among Indians,

resulting in sectarianism -making people Muslims or Sikhs before they were Indians- and “communal feeling” -making them identify with Bengal or the Punjab rather than India. These policies led inexorably to the horrors of Partition upon India’s independence or, in Tharoor’s memorable aphorism, “a birth that was also an abortion” (15). Such issues predictably underlie the historical perspectives of *The Great Indian Novel*. Tharoor prefaces the latter with an explanatory note for the benefit of those who may find the book “neither great, nor authentically Indian, nor even much of a novel”. His title and chief inspiration are, he explains, provided by the Indian epic of the *Mahabharata*, whose Sanskrit name is the equivalent of “Great India”.

Reduced to its barest outline, the *Mahabharata* may be seen as a dynastic struggle between the Pandavas, the five sons of Pandu, and the Kauravas, the hundred sons of Pandu’s half-brother Dhritarashtra. In moral terms it is also traditionally read as a struggle between the forces of good and evil, *dharma* and *adharma*. Fraudulently dispossessed by the Kauravas and forced into exile, the Pandavas later return to reclaim their birthright. The climactic battle of Kurukshetra is a vindication of the Pandavas, although the cost of victory is so high that there might seem to be no real winners in the struggle.

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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So faithfully does Tharoor transpose elements of the *Mahabharata* to modern Indian history, that it may be more useful to consider the significant *differences* between the novel and its epic original, rather than the many similarities. Tharoor's Kauravas thus represent India's Congress Party; the blind patriarch, Dhritarashtra, is India's first prime minister, Nehru; while the chaste Kaurava *pater familias* Bhishma, generally referred to as Gangaji, is Gandhi. But rather than a hundred sons, Tharoor's Dhritarashtra fathers a single daughter, Priya Duryodhani -the oldest Kaurava in the *Mahabharata* is called Duryodhana-, hailed as the future ruler of all India: an obvious reference to Indira Gandhi. Another elaboration of the epic original concerns the five Pandavas themselves, as Tharoor moves to more direct allegory: Yudhishtir thus symbolizes India's best political traditions, Bhishma its loyal armed forces, Arjun an articulate press, Nakul and Sahadev the administrative and diplomatic services, respectively. All five Pandavas are also devoted to their common wife, Draupadi, who represents the "body politic", or Indian democracy and wilts visibly with the imposition of Duryodhani's "siege" -a reference to Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency from 1975 to 1977.

One of the subtlest touches of *The Great Indian Novel*, however, is Tharoor's choice of narrator, Ved Vyas with his

amanuensis Ganapathi. According to tradition, the *Mahabharata* was compiled by the Sanskrit poet Vyasa, who dictated it to the scribe Ganapathi, another name for the “elephant-god” Ganesh, at the suggestion of Brahma himself. Those unfamiliar with Sanskrit normally read the epic in one of its many modern “transcreations”, with Tharoor acknowledging a debt to the English versions of P. Lal and C.R. Rajagopalachari. But the real-life Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, known popularly as “C.R.”, as a close associate of Gandhi’s and one of modern India’s greatest statesmen was intimately involved with events described in the novel. Tharoor’s Ganapathi is a Southern Indian like C.R.(and, incidentally, like Tharoor himself, whose family hail from Kerala; and even more significantly, the fictional Ved Vyas emulates the historical C.R. by becoming the first Indian governor-general of India. Tharoor thus cleverly conflates poet and redactor, ironically authenticating his otherwise fantastic narrative by placing this composite figure at its very centre.

The ability to detect literary parallels in the novel is ultimately determined by one’s knowledge of the *Mahabharata* and familiarity with modern Indian history. (note 1) Pandu, the non-biological father of the Pandavas, thus becomes Subash Bose, founder of the pro-Japanese Indian National Army;

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

Karna, Kunta Devi's child by the sun, becomes Muhammad Ali Jinnah, first president of Pakistan, etc. There are, however, countless other literary allusions, such as those to Paul Scott's novels of the Raj, or to "Maurice Forster just down from Cambridge" -one of the nastiest colonial administrators is called Ronnie Heaslop after the magistrate in *A Passage to India*.

Like its great literary predecessor, *Midnight's Children*, *The Great Indian Novel* contains memorable recreations of scenes from early twentieth-century Indian history, with the Amritsar massacre of 1919, for example, featuring in both narratives. Other episodes, such as Gandhi's salt march of 1930, comically recreated as a protest against a mango tax in the novel's "Sixth Book", are unique to Tharoor. In both books, however, the second half is played out in post-independence India and it is at this point that more explicit colonial and postcolonial scenarios fade, even as the ways of Rushdie and Tharoor also part.

### **2. *Show business; or, all the world's a screen***

With his second novel, Tharoor left the chronological constraints of twentieth-century Indian history, to work from another script: an appropriate metaphor, of course, since *Show Business* is, at its simplest, a satirical account of Bollywood,

or the Bombay film industry. Although drawing on various fictional conventions, however, the novel is neither a classic realist text nor a postmodern one in the sense of explicitly undermining the assumptions of realistic fiction. The conventions parodied are rather those of the Hindi-language popular *filmi* -the latter's own relations to any identifiable conventions of realism are another matter. The structure of *Show Business* thus confirms a tendency in Tharoor, discussed later with reference to *Riot*, to use a literary frame or vehicle remote from most kinds of novelistic convention. But the generic gap is probably of little concern to a writer whose interests, beyond the purely comic, are mainly satirical as well as didactic, and whose programme has numerous points of contact with opinions expounded in the *Midnight* collection.

In a gesture to cinematic, rather than novelistic, convention, *Show Business* is constructed in six sections or "Takes". The takes are not single scenes, however, but rather tripartite narrative sequences: the first part of each sequence consists mainly of reminiscences from megastar Ashok Banjara on his rise and fall in the Bollywood film industry, punctuated by an unsuccessful foray into national politics; the following part contains the comically abbreviated plot of an Ashok film; the final part features a monologue by someone close to the

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

protagonist: his stock, villain co-actor, Prinia; his father, Kulbushan; his lover and co-star, Mehnaz Elahi; and his brother, Ashwin. The monologues are literally delivered *at* Ashok, lying comatose in a hospital bed from causes as yet undisclosed. Here at least, Tharoor borrows the novelistic convention of narrative suspense, but remains characteristically cavalier on questions of verisimilitude. The exceptions to this fairly elaborate symmetry are section three -effectively a “double-take”, with two sets of reminiscences, two versions of the same film and two monologues- and section six, containing only a short monologue from the expiring Ashok.

*Show Business* is undoubtedly the Tharoor novel furthest from postcolonial programmes and paradigms. John McLeod (2000:33) has usefully pinpointed three kinds of texts privileged by postcolonial studies: texts by writers from countries with a history of colonialism, especially those concerned with the effects of colonialism, past or present; texts by those who have migrated from former colonies or who are the descendants of migrants; texts produced during colonialism (re)-read in the light of theories of colonial discourse. If the first category is unhelpfully broad -which country was not colonised at some point in time- *The Great Indian Novel* does deal in part with the legacy of the British Raj, whilst *Riot* is much concerned

with the effects of coca-colonisation at the hands of a more recent imperial power; *Show Business* does not fit clearly into any of these categories.

Its initial target is Bollywood. In fact, certain satirical images used to suggest Bollywood's essential artificiality are fairly crude: these include the false breasts of the rising Ashok's more celebrated co-star, Abha Patel (20), or the performing monkey in a later Ashok film (108ff). More effective are the abridged versions of six Ashok films -complete with short postscripts listing elements "... an entire comic sub-plot featuring a domestic servant in a Gandhi cap and a fat woman in a nightdress, and four songs" [49]-, omitted from these summaries for the sake of brevity. The most effective evidence for the inanity of the films may nevertheless be Tharoor's English renderings of their Hindi playback lyrics: "Let me taste your shining lips,/Place my hand upon your hips;/Feel your rises and your dips," (135). Their absurdity, down to the outrageous rhymes, seems vaguely reminiscent of Gilbert and Sullivan operetta in late Victorian England, with roughly the same reality content.

Ultimately, however, *Show Business* may display a slightly ambivalent attitude towards the Hindi *filmi*. Its energy and ingenuity are often praised and Tharoor clearly has satirical

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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targets beyond Bollywood, meaning Indian public life and, in particular, the world of politics. The proximity of the worlds of politics and show business are underlined by recent Indian history, with the most prominent example of overlap being the celebrated “MGR”, the screen star who went on to become Chief Minister of Tamil Nadu State. (note 2) The structural links in Tharoor’s novel between the worlds of show business and politics are guaranteed, initially, by the fact that Ashok is the son of the Minister of State for Minor Textiles and, ultimately, by his own unsuccessful attempts at a political career. The monologue of his father (Kulbhushan) is thus source of some fairly unassimilated cultural commentary:

...I suppose our worlds are not that far apart after all. You function amidst fantasies, playing your assigned role in a make-believe India that has never existed and can never exist. As a politician I too play a role in a world of make-believe, a world in which I pretend that the ideas and principles and values that brought me into politics can still make a difference. Perhaps I too am performing, Ashok, in an India that has never really existed and can never exist (118).

Political contexts are more closely integrated in the fourth section of the narrative, when Ashok goes into politics himself and is adopted as Congress party candidate in his father’s old constituency. Once elected, however, he is not considered for

ministerial office and spends his days in the *Lok Sabha* -India's lower house- in utter boredom, before he is caught up in a scandal involving illegal Swiss bank accounts and, with his resignation makes a premature exit from political life.

Tharoor's concerns as social commentator and analyst emphatically transcend the Bombay film industry, which is often no more than the stick he needs with which to beat Indian political institutions. It is true that he directly accuses the film world of repressing the country's troubles by peddling a fantasy escapist world, or even of being responsible for the kind of sexual harassment known indulgently in India as "eve-teasing"; but his characters often also reflect other features of which Tharoor is critical and where their links with the film world are largely incidental. This concerns, above all, the sexist and patriarchal abuses endemic in Indian society. It is not an approach for which Tharoor needs the support of any literary models, but is rather a close reflection and explicit dramatisation of a number of concerns voiced in the various chapters of *Midnight*.

This collection, published in 1997, is a wide-ranging series of ten essays largely elaborated from previous journalistic work, discussing aspects of modern Indian history and society. The acknowledged sources are predominantly Indian or Ameri-

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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can, which presumably accounts for the considerable range in style and complexity in a collection now repackaged for a western market. There are thus informative presentations for the outsider: the first six essays, covering such topics as recent Indian history, regional variations, caste, ethnic minorities and Indians abroad, account for barely forty percent of the book. These are followed by more substantial contributions: the four remaining essays contain detailed discussion of India's economy, its political institutions and its future prospects.

It was noted above that Tharoor's fiction is socially committed, even didactic, and *Midnight* provides a repertoire for many ideas introduced in *Show Business* and *Riot*, the two novels with contemporary settings. In *Midnight*, Tharoor thus recognizes Indian cinema as one of his personal obsessions and regularly makes unflattering comparisons between the country's cinema and its politics, whether in a passing remark on fickleness: "Indian politicians changed parties the way a *filmi* dancer changed skirts as often as it was expedient and as long as it appealed" (221-2); or a more substantial and scathing comment on basic ethical standards:

Two classes of people are, however, exempt from these norms: politicians and movie stars. Such larger-than-life figures enjoy a societal *carte blanche* to lie, cheat, dissemble, and commit large-

scale larceny, adultery and tax-fraud; only murder is a little more difficult, though even there a major politician and a leading film star have been released from jail after allegations of offences that might have learned lesser men fates worth than death (280).

Beyond the hilarity of its parody and satire, then, *Show Business* is a novel with a conscience, demonstrating a genuine concern for the ills of contemporary Indian society, although it does address these within a narrative frame remote from most literary tradition

### 3. A well-crafted riot

If Salman Rushdie has acknowledged the liberating effect on his own work of various contemporary novelists – with Grass and García Márquez the most significant examples (1991:273ff) – then Shashi Tharoor clearly owes some similar kind of debt to Rushdie. And yet, it is equally fruitful to emphasize the differences between the two authors. Author of only three major novels to date, Tharoor may not be as prolific as Rushdie, but in one obvious sense of cultural space, he may be more Indian.

The contrast can be most neatly encapsulated with reference to the chapter in *Midnight* on that vital national institution, the *NRI* or “non-resident Indian”. (note 3) Tharoor’s essay introduces two satirical current readings of the *NRI* acronym: “nev-

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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er relinquished India” and “not really Indian”. Both writers are exemplary NRIs in the original institutional sense of the term, but the respective alternative readings could be applied a little mischievously to contrast Tharoor, India’s most distinguished foreign-based diplomat; and Rushdie, long-term fugitive and maverick with a British passport, increasingly remote from India -and, most recently, abandoning the Empire as well. For, by a striking irony, both writers are currently residents of New York, although it’s hard to imagine they frequent the same bars.

*Show Business*, with its Bombay and Bollywood milieu, might be thought to have even closer affinities with the Rushdie of *Midnight’s Children* than does *The Great Indian Novel*. But the significance of film is different in the two novels. What is an insistent use of cinematic techniques and analogies as metafictional device in *Midnight’s Children* now becomes a wholesale adaptation of Bombay’s film world, on and off screen, in *Show Business* – to such an extent that I. Allan Sealy’s exactly contemporary *Hero* (1991), the story of a Bollywood superstar who becomes prime minister of India, may be a better analogy.

*Riot*, in turn, has at least a superficial analogy with *The Great Indian Novel*, through its amalgam of history, fiction and Indian

literary tradition in the service of humour and satire, although the relative weighting of the three elements is now radically altered. First and most obviously, the panorama of twentieth-century Indian history up to the end of Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency now gives way to a more recent historical event: the destruction of the Ayodhya mosque in 1992. (note 4)

Second, the earlier use of literary tradition with the virtuoso rewriting of Indian history in terms of the *Mahabharata* is now replaced by a far more diffuse kind of imitation, explained in a brief exposition at the exact midpoint of the novel. Here, the male protagonist notes that a narrative should contain all nine essential emotional elements prescribed by the *Nāṭyaśāstra* for any work of entertainment: "love, hate, joy, sorrow, pity, disgust, courage, pride and compassion" (136). Of this, more later; although one may say at once that familiarity with this ancient Sanskrit treatise does not provide anything like the rewards offered by a redaction of the *Mahabharata* read in conjunction with *The Great Indian Novel*.

Third and finally, fiction: arguably, the least prominent of the three formative elements in Tharoor's first novel. Most of its leading characters, Indian or British, are identifiable both as historical figures with epic avatars and the fictional dimension is more a question of their occasionally performing actions

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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without historical foundation, although even these – as when Gandhi’s salt march is transformed into a protest against a mango tax – become comic versions of genuine historical events. The truly imaginary and typically secondary characters, on the other hand, may be doubly so, as in the case of the already cited Ronnie Heaslop, who is resurrected from an earlier fictional text. In *Riot*, however, the characters are divided between Indians and Americans, with not a Briton in sight, and none of them are immediately identifiable from either history or previous fiction.

In terms of fictional space, moreover, the account of the very real destruction of the *Babri Masjid* mosque is actually eclipsed by the description of the relationship between V. Lakshman, district magistrate of Zalilgarh, and Priscilla Hart, a young graduate working on an American aid programme; or one might argue, conversely, that Priscilla’s tragic death is overshadowed, to some extent, by the communal violence provoked by the Ayodhya conflict.

Lakshman himself is both part-time poet and novelist, and therefore the focus of the metafictional, not to say narcissistic, component of *Riot*. In an early conversation with Priscilla, Lakshman thus describes his ambition of writing not a comic epic -something he notes as already done by “this chap who’s

just reinvented the *Mahabharata* as a twentieth-century story”- but a novel that “reads like, like an encyclopedia”:

What I mean is, something in which you can turn to any page and read. You pick up chapter 23, and you get one thread of the plot. Then you go forwards to chapter 37, or backwards to 6, and you get another thread. And they’re all interconnected, but you see the interconnections differently depending on the order in which you read them. It’s like each bit of reading adds to the sum total of the reader’s knowledge, just like an encyclopedia. But to each bit of new reading he brings the knowledge he’s acquired up to that point -so that each chapter means more, or less, depending on how much he’s learned already (136).

The narrative actually consists of some eighty short sections ranging from letters and journals to interview transcripts and newspaper reports. At its core, however, are the letters written by Priscilla to an American girlfriend juxtaposed with various scrapbook entries, together with excerpts from Lakshman’s journal which are supplemented by a few letters to Priscilla.

The other major contributor to this multi-stranded narrative is the aptly named American investigative journalist Randy Diggs. Diggs interviews, among others, Lakshman, local police-chief Gurinder Singh, Priscilla’s grieving parents, visiting academic Mohammed Sarwar and local political leader Ram Chaman Gupta. At this point, history impinges more ominous-

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

ly on fiction. Gupta, whose statements to Diggs are naturally made in Hindi and then translated, is the local co-ordinator of the *Ram Sila Poojan* programme to build a temple on the site of the destroyed mosque. He is also identifiable generically, if not individually, as a member of the Hindu fundamentalist *Bharatiya Janata* or “People’s Party”. Professor Sarwar, completing fieldwork on a historical case of Hindu-Muslim syncretism –as Tharoor acknowledges at the end of the novel – is based on a real-life scholar and old friend of the author’s. In the same context, Tharoor also thanks another close friend, Harsh Mander of the IAS or Indian Administrative Service for access to an unpublished account of a riot in Khargone, Madhya Pradesh –although there were no fatalities on this occasion. Most interestingly of all, the story of the Khargone riot was published in 2001 by Penguin India as part of a debut documentary collection by Mander under the title, *Unheard Voices: Stories of Forgotten People*. This information is followed by the customary disclaimer emphasizing the fictionality of all the key events in the novel, with particular reference to personal relationship, character elements, beliefs and motivations.

A key issue in discussing *Riot* must inevitably be the audience for which it is intended and in this context it will be use-

ful to return to Tharoor's *Midnight*, as well as consider the *Nāṭyaúāstra* itself. The latter is probably most accessible to the reader with no Indian language but English though the translation with critical notes begun by the distinguished Sanskrit scholar, Adya Rangacharya. His untimely death in 1984 meant that later chapters were completed by his daughter, Indian English novelist Shashi Deshpande, translating from an earlier version by her father in Kannada. The *Nāṭyaúāstra*, attributed to the sage Bharata, is an early and perhaps the most important Sanskrit treatise on Indian drama. The present corpus of 36 or 37 chapters, however, may be as late as the seventh or eighth century A.D. Its prestige is emphasized by the fact that it is often referred to as a fifth "veda", but one that is accessible to a much wider spectrum of readers; its comprehensiveness is underlined by the classic boast, similar to that made for the *Mahabharata*: "What is found here may be found elsewhere. But what is not here cannot be found anywhere".

And yet, for all this, a careful reading of the treatise fails to suggest why the book is as central to the form of *Riot* as Lakshman would have us believe from his comments to Priscilla. One immediate point to be made is that the *Natyasastra* is a highly technical dramaturgy providing special advice for

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

actors on such things as voice and gesture and even stage make-up. Of the 37 chapters, only chapter 17 is, by the author's own admission, a direct contribution to poetics and it may be this section, in particular, that Lakshman (or Tharoor) had in mind with his list of "classic elements". The naïve western reader of the treatise may be more struck, however, not only by its comprehensiveness, alluded to above, but by the taxonomic passion of its author: as Sri Adya Rangacharya wryly notes, "the author is over-eager to divide, sub-divide, and, if one could say it, "sub-sub-divide" a given process or function or nation" (372). One thus searches for the prototype of Priscilla in the *Samanya Abhinaya* section, devoted to the twenty-four different natures of women:

A woman who has soft limbs, steady and almost unwinking eyes, ... with corner glances, free from disease, glamorous, truthful, straightforward, kind, little-sweating, returns love, eats moderately and loves scent is a woman with divine nature (190).

A woman who is slim-waisted, ... snub-nosed, has thin shanks and broad roving eyes, is fond of forest, fickle, walks fast, is susceptible to fright, timid, hairy, fond of music and irascible is one with a deer nature (192).

A woman who is steady, has symmetrical sides, thighs, hips, back and neck, is good-looking and charitable, has straight and thick hair (on her head), small, fickle-minded, speaks

harsh and walks fast and disposed to lust and anger is one with a horse's nature (192).

And so on, through monkey, elephant, camel, buffalo etc., with none of the twenty-four paradigms quite seeming to fit Priscilla. My less than reverential attitude towards a Sanskrit classic is partly justified. It echoes a similarly satirical vein within *Riot* itself, when local police chief Gurinder Dingh, in an exchange with Lakshman, derides the taxonomies of an even more famous Sanskrit treatise, the *Kamasutra*:

I never thought sex could be made so boring, yaar! Page after page of detail – the nine types of sexual union, the sixty-four arts, the definition of the different types of marks a woman can make with her bloody nails, the classifications of the female yoni as marelike or elephantine. How does it bugger-all matter, man, whether a woman's embrace is like the "twining of a creeper" or the "climbing of a tree"? And have you ever heard anything more pissing ridiculous than Vatsyayana's clinical categories of the sounds women make when being stropped? (209).

Gurinder Singh's outburst is not quite logical, of course, because he then goes on to quote the *Kamasutra* quite seriously as a warning to Lakshman with regard to Priscilla: "A girl who has already been joined with others, that is, one who is no longer a maiden, should never be loved, for it would be reproachable to do such a thing" (209). It is the very point that

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

has partly soured Lakshman's relationship with Priscilla. Gurinder Singh, then, is no more consistent in his simultaneous ridicule and advocacy of the *Kamasutra*, than Lakshman in his respectful citation but subsequent indifference to the *Nāṭyaśāstra*. In each case, the references to a Sanskrit classic could be read as an intrinsic function of characterisation as much as extrinsic poetics or erotic psychology.

At this point, therefore, it may be useful to return to the other formative element of *Riot*, deriving from Tharoor's roles as explicator, mediator and cultural journalist. His *Midnight* may presume to explain India to Indians -and has therefore been considered patronising or simplistic by some of his more traditional and less dazzlingly cosmopolitan countrymen- but it is even more a work written for a western, read American, public. Tharoor's ideological sympathies are fairly clear in this volume. In a specially written introduction, he places India "at the intersection of four of the most important debates facing the world at the end of the twentieth century" (3). These are: "bread-versus-freedom" or whether democracy is a luxury that many developing countries cannot afford); the "centralization-versus-federalism" -the particularly Indian issue of "strong central government", a good dose of which the country incidentally experienced during Indira Gandhi's Emergency

Rule; “pluralism-versus-fundamentalism”, with special reference to the secularism established in India’s Constitution, but now threatened by the *BJP* and its allies; and the self-evident “Coca-colonization” debate, or “globalization versus self-reliance” (3-4).

Tharoor’s own standpoint on these issues is made quite clear, although not by ringing affirmations, but rather by a rhetorically subtle dismissal of the counter-positions:

Not all agree with my vision of India. There are those who wish it to become a Hindu Rashtra, a land of and for the Hindu majority; those who wish to raise higher the protectionist barriers against foreign investment that are slowly beginning to come down; those who believe that a firm hand at the national helm would be preferable to the failures of democracy... (4).

One notes that the “centralism-versus-federalism” debate, perhaps considered too dull for his western readers, is omitted from Tharoor’s implicit declaration of personal preferences.

Now the relevance of all this to *Riot* should be obvious, even without Priscilla Hart’s father being called Rudyard, after the great imperial apologist, and made a Coca Cola executive. In a long and rather unlikely confession to Randy Diggs at what is virtually the first interview, Rudyard Hart explains his growing frustration at the failure to promote Coca Cola in In-

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

dia, his subsequent involvement with his secretary and their eventual discovery *in flagrante* by a twelve-year-old Priscilla. For connoisseurs of the homology, the episode can easily be read figuratively as multi-national capitalism's "fucking" of or, expressed more delicately, "seducing" of India; and to judge from the eager Nandini, fantasizing comfort and affluence in the United States with a new American husband, there are plenty of Indians willing to be seduced.

Two brief sections of the novel must be described as almost entirely "didactic", although such an aesthetically questionable concept does little justice to Tharoor's subtle narrative counterpoint: for while one of them -a letter from Lakshman- is essentially a briefing on India for Priscilla and all the rest of us, the second -most of the rest of Rudyard's confession- is indirectly a commentary on India for Indians as seen by an intelligent though biased outsider.

Rudyard Hart is the son of American missionaries who had worked in India and he inherits his parents' fascination for the land and its people. Appointed marketing director for Coca Cola India, he returns to the country with a different kind of mission. His confession to Randy Diggs (29ff) also gives Tharoor a chance to hold up a sharply focused mirror of the country to Indians themselves. In an authentic-sounding account

of the problems faced by foreign companies, Hart explains Mrs Gandhi's encouragement of foreign investment, together with left-wing opposition to coca-colonization -the real-life politician, George Fernandes features prominently here- and the more substantial institutional impediment of the Foreign Exchange Regulation Act of 1973. In spite of a scheme to offer a quid-pro-quo by marketing Indian products in the United States, the planned expansion of Coca Cola fails to materialize. The reasons for this are clear enough from Hart's surprisingly frank or Tharoor's rather undigested account of the economic realities of the venture:

Now, you've got to understand that Coca-Cola India was actually a wholly owned company, wholly owned by Coca Cola in the U.S., and what we did was to manufacture and supply Coke concentrates, plus providing the marketing and technical support to our franchisees. The bottlers were all Indian-owned companies that bought the concentrate from us. This way we kept control of the product and of our secret formula, 7X, but we didn't need to employ more than a hundred people in India ourselves (32).

After his initial failure, Hart works laboriously with the Indian authorities on some kind of joint venture, but at this point, he begins to lose the support of the parent company. In the words of a memo from Atlanta:

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

---

‘Coke is a product avidly sought by countries round the world. We shouldn’t dilute out prestige by bending over backwards to accommodate every unreasonable demand of every intransigent government’ (35).

It is in the period of disillusion following this rebuff that Hart begins the adventure with his secretary, Nandini. The episode provides a strongly symmetrical structural counterpart, and thematic anticipation, of Lakshman’s relationship with Priscilla. Both affairs are fuelled by male hankerings for the exotic and feature much uninhibited sex, with mirrors playing a not insignificant role. In both affairs, moreover, the last recorded encounter features a sexual act where male sensitivity, at least, is eclipsed by rampant triumphalism -for Hart, “like a cowboy taming a mare”; for Lakshman, “transported by his conquest”. By the time of the excruciating scene where Priscilla bursts in on her father and Nandini, Rudyard has long relinquished any nobler ideals; or, to return to the animal taxonomies beloved of traditional Indian *sutras*, he has abandoned the missionary position in favour of doggy style.

With their echoes and parallels, the two erotic relationships foregrounded by the novel are the stuff of literary patterning. But Lakshman also provides a documentary counterpart to Rudyard Hart’s confession with his own briefing on India in a letter to Priscilla:

I'm an administrator, not a political scientist, but I'd say there are five major sources of division in India – language, region, caste, class and religion (42).

He proceeds to enlarge on these in terms remarkably close to those used in *Midnight*. (note 5) In the final reckoning, however, Lakshman is more successful in his sophisticated exposition of India's problems than in the resolution of his personal difficulties. Or, conversely, one might claim that Tharoor is also ultimately more convincing in his representation of the Lakshman-Priscilla relationship, however allegorically this is intended to be read. The climax of the novel is bathetic rather than tragic as Lakshman's involvement with Priscilla is intuited by Katherine Hart, covered up by Gurinder Singh, but discovered and reserved for future exploitation by the politician, Ram Charan Gupta. This possibility nevertheless lies in an undefined future: for the moment, there is only a cover-up as Tharoor ironically cites the Sanskrit motto beneath the Lion of Ashoka on the state seal of India, which may be translated as "truth will prevail". One lasting impression, however, is that if Lakshman is found wanting, then it is almost incidentally because he is an Indian, and far more pertinently because he is a man; although it must be said that, in spite of the legacy of the Mrs Gandhi Widow and attempts by the Congress party

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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to involve her younger son's widow, Sonia, India –more than most countries– is run by men.

The final moral inventory of *Riot* seems to leave a progressive West with some credit and a traditional India somewhat in the red, after the apparent murder of Priscilla by a vindictive Indian husband whose exhausted wife has received abortion aid from the local American-run clinic. Priscilla's distraught parents will perhaps find each other again in their bereavement. Rudyard Hart even offers financial support to the sister of his daughter's former co-worker, in hospital after a "kitchen accident". The novel's "Afterword" leaves the reader with a "chanting mob of Hindu fanatics" (269) and the *Ram Sila Poojan* programme.

In 1997, the year *Midnight* was published, it would have been natural to speculate whether Tharoor's next narrative would draw primarily on an ancient literary model like the *Mahabharata*, or a contemporary -the novelist's own- socio-political agenda, like that set out so clearly in *Midnight*. (note 6) According to the present reading, *Riot* belongs clearly to the second category. Future novels by Tharoor must be eagerly awaited by all admirers of Indian literature in English. Judging by his fiction to date, moreover, their literary form is likely to

confound critical expectations, even as their political awareness and ideological commitment should surprise no-one.

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**Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor**  
John Skinner

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1. I have used C.R. Rajagopalachari's prose redaction of the *Mahabharata* (in the Bharatiya Bhavan edition) as the basis of my comparisons. On *dharma* and *adharma*, see Tharoor's helpful note at the end of the novel.
2. The most comprehensive comparison with the *Mahabharata* that I know is Raita Meerivirta's unpublished thesis, "Myth, Fiction and History in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*". For standard histories of India, see Spear (1990) and Wolpert (2000).
3. Born Marudur Gopalamenon Ramachandran in Kandy, Sri Lanka, "MGR" moved with his family to India at the age of six. After a dazzling film career, he entered politics with the DMK [*Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam* or "Dravidian Progressive Federation"] and served in both the Madras (Chennai) and Tamil Nadu legislatures. In 1972, he set up a rival party, renamed *AIADMK*, and became chief minister of Tamil Nadu, being re-elected for three consecutive terms. He overcame a bullet wound when shot by fellow actor M.R. Radha in 1967 and survived a paralytic stroke in 1984 for three years. His funeral procession was attended by more than two million people. Muthuvel Karunanidhi, his predecessor as chief minister and subsequent bitter political rival, was a celebrated scriptwriter in the Tamil film industry. See [www.chennai.net/film/mgr.php](http://www.chennai.net/film/mgr.php).
4. An *NRI* [non-resident Indian] is legally defined as a person of Indian "origin". This means, in practice, anyone who has ever held an Indian passport, or with a parent or grandparent who was "an Indian and a permanent resident of undivided India". The designation also applies

## Literary Moonlighting: the Cultural Spaces of Shashi Tharoor

John Skinner

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to the wife (but not the husband!) of any of the above. See *Midnight*, 144f.

**5.** Millions of Hindus believe that the sixteenth-century mosque (Babri Masjid) in Ayodhya, Uttar Pradesh, is built on the “birthplace” of the god Rama. A mob of Hindu fanatics destroyed the mosque in 1992, leading to widespread communal violence, and the battle to construct a new Hindu temple is still in progress. This conflict forms the backdrop to *Riot*.

**6.** These issues are precisely the concern of the first five chapters of *Midnight*, under such self-explanatory headings as “Scheduled Castes, Unscheduled Change” (Ch.4) or “Of Indians and Other Minorities” (Ch.5).