

British Loot And Plunder Of India: A Post-Colonial Study Of Shashi Tharoor's An Era Of Darkness

Priyanka¹, Dr Gowher Ahmed Naik²

¹M.A (English)

²Assistant Professor Department of English School of Social Sciences and Languages Lovely Professional University, Punjab

Abstract

Shashi Tharoor made an attempt to talk about the countless mistreatments done by the British Raj through his non-fictional piece of work- An Era of Darkness. The title clearly signifies that those two centuries were the era of Darkness when the Britishers ruled India. Due to them, Indians had to go through extreme humiliation, and suffering and were dragged into the well of poverty. The hangover of such pitiful situations is still there. Situations like Britishers considering themselves as superior, Indians were not allowed in Civil Servants selections, to this Jawaharlal Nehru says, "The Indian civil service was neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service" (Tharoor 60). They introduced multiple methods to divide India in all aspects, so that exploitation will be unchallenging. For that, they introduced the concept of the census. Everything they did was for their own benefit. Whether it was the introduction of railways, disruption of communal schools, or not providing charity to Bengal famine. Tharoor doesn't want reparations for the destruction that was done by the Britishers, instead, he wants them to acknowledge and apologise for the same. Through this paper, a clear expression of the plight of Indians and the misdeeds of the Britishers is portrayed.

Keywords: Pre-independence, Colonialism, Orientals, Occidentals, Injustice

Introduction

Shashi Tharoor is an Indian former International civil servant, diplomat, bureaucrat and politician, public intellectual and writer who was born on 9th March 1956. He has been serving in Parliament as a member of Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala since 2009. His writings reflect Post-colonialism and Post-modern perspectives. His famous works are The Great Indian Novel (1989), Show Business (1992), India: From Midnight to the Millennium (1997), Riot(2001), Bookless in Baghdad(2005), An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India(2016), India Shastra: Reflections on the Nation in our Time(2015), Why I am A Hindu(2018).

Through his non-fiction piece of literature, Tharoor made various arguments from the viewpoint of Colonized and made an

effort to challenge the concept of colonialism and Orientalism. It is a situation of pity even though the colonizers departed yet the colonizers were not free from the hangover of suffering. In this context, Mr SijoVergheese C. writes in a chapter on Gayatri Spivak's Theory of Subalternity,

"The outcome of colonialism is that the west still occupies the position of an ideal state in the mind of the colonized people. Not only the lands but their minds were also being colonized" (Vergheese121).

In May 2015, Tharoor spoke about the exploitation and monetary degradation done by the British at Oxford University. Though they looted India, instead of paying compensation, at least they should admit the wrong deeds and present an apology for the same. In the first 8 chapters, Tharoor cogently depicted how

Indians paid for their own oppression and depicts how the British government misled us and colonised Indians for 200 yrs.

Shashi Tharoor's book "Era of Darkness" was a bold step taken as a debater where he talks about the exploitation done by the Britishers. Due to this, Indians still have not recovered from the agony the Britishers gave India. That colonial period was the dark age for Indians as a lot of riots, feminine, racist and unprecedented economic exploitation were experienced.

Will Durant who is a young historian and philosopher in 1930.

"The British conquest of India was the invasion and destruction of a High Civilisation by a trading company [the British East India Company] utterly without scruple or Principle, Careless of art and greedy of gain, overrunning with Fire and sword a country temporarily disordered and helpless, bribing and murdering, annexing and stealing, and beginning that career of illegal and 'legal' plunder which has now (1930) gone on ruthlessly for one hundred and seventy-three years"(Durant 7).

In this book Era of Darkness, Tharoor gave a broader explanation of his speech which he delivered at Oxford union speech by accumulating information from selecting accounts and presenting it as a paced narrative. He clearly expressed his notions in his eight chapters where he made statements which were against the British plundering that Indians had to go through. He talks about whatever the British did was for their own benefit.

He states statements which were opposite to what historical books talk about. He took acute proof from authentic sources and blames the Occidentals for all the things which were not fruitful to India.

He successfully divided the country. Moreover, the battle of Plassey was beneficial for the Clive and East India Company Official. India's contribution to men, wars and

everything was waged by the Britishers, and they never paid a penny to India. Tharoor starts to argue that he is incapable of finding anything that regards revitalising in the entire span of Britishers ruling India. Many historians expressed in anger, how their rule was decaying and indescribable. In this period, India faced doom as it.

"They displaced nawabs and Maharajas for a price emptied their treasures and took over their states through various methods (including, from the 1840s, the cynical "doctrine of lapse" whenever a ruler died without an heir), and stripped farmers of their of their ownership of the lands they had tilled for generations" (Tharoor 3).

Later, Tharoor says how the Britishers lead to their damnation in the Indian economy. As of 1700, it was 27% of the world economy later at the beginning 23 per cent, which was larger than all Europe's economies. Sadly, when the Britishers left India, it was almost the situation of rag pickers. India's economy dropped to 3%. Therefore, the writer depicts, "The reason was simple: India was governed for the benefit of Britain" (Tharoor 4).

Extreme shaming and continuous, haven't ever violence been forced onto the nation. India experienced this during this time. A multitude of artificially induced famines, mistreatment, abuse of authority, bureaucratic corruption, racial biases, wars, the expulsion of Indians to foreign countries, and extraordinary levels of economic deception. Even the British Empire admits that there is no reasonable excuse for its control in India. In his academic essay, Sebin Justine, a research scholar at Mahatma Gandhi University, says—

"The text is produced in the background of the massive oppression and

exploitation of the colonial masters that lasted for more than two centuries. The book is written in the context of the colonial darkness where our blood was not valued at all, where innumerable Indians perished like worms, where our forefathers toiled and moiled in the cotton and opium fields like Black American slaves” (Justine 347).

When the British were in power, the centre was more in the commercial interest. This we can study in the context of “Capitalism” and “Imperialism”. Colonies experienced the exploitation of natural resources. It all started with the “British Industrial Revolution” whose main motive was to destroy India’s thriving manufacturing Industries. This can be demonstrated through Textile Industries and their situations.

“The British systematically set about destroying India’s textile manufacturing and exports, substituting India’s manufacturing and exports, substituting India’s textiles manufacturing and exports, substituting Indian textiles by British ones manufactured in England. Ironically the British used Indian raw material and exported the finished products back to India and the rest of the world, the industrial equivalent of adding insult to injury” (Tharoor 7).

Mudhusoodan Pillai from John McLeod’s book, *Beginning Post Colonialism* “Colonialism was a lucrative commercial operation, bringing wealth and riches to Western nations through the economic exploitation of others. It pursued economic profit, reward and riches. Hence, colonialism and capitalism share a mutually supportive relationship with each other” (Tharoor 21).

The goods which Indians produced were sold directly to Britain. As India grew cotton but all were mainly sent to Britain.

Thereafter, Indians didn’t weave much. Therefore, the condition went worse as master weavers became beggars. Dhaka which is currently the capital of Bangladesh was once an epicentre of the production of Muslin. Their production had a drastic fall from lakhs in 1760 to 50,000 by the 1820s. The widespread Rural poverty was the result of British rule. Due to the introduction of modern machinery, handmade textiles became obsolete. Indian weavers became the victims of technological obsolescence. They left no stone unturned to block India’s industrial development. Once India used to be known for manufacturing steel, textiles and ships. Unfortunately, it was reduced to the colony that produced raw materials under British rule. When Britishers departed the contribution to exporting manufacturing goods reduced from twenty-seven per cent to barely 2 per cent.

If we take the account of handloom clothes which used to be a great exporter to over the world until the East India Company took over. The Britishers showed their atrociousness by cutting the thumbs off Indian Weavers to imposing tariffs and duties up to seventy to eighty per cent. As a result, Indian manufactured clothes were expensive and were incompetent with Britain manufactured goods. Eventually, master weavers in India became beggars.

The traumatising of British rule didn’t take rest. Taxation in the name of theft began and they loot millions each year between 1765 and 1815. It became the favourite activity for the Britishers, and they started treating us as cash cows. They started up collecting money with a minimum of 50 per cent. This was too burdensome for the people. Among two third of the population who were colonised by Britishers fled their lands in the late eighteenth century. “[tax] defaulters were confined in cages and exposed to the burning sun; fathers sold their children to meet the rising rates”(Durant).

Robert Clive was one of the colonialists. He was victorious in the seminal Battle of Plassey that took place in 1757. He first returned to England after exploiting Indians and collected £234,000. He was not ashamed of his deeds and came back to India in 1765 and collected £400,000. Whatever he got from Indians in the form of 'presents', he sold them all at five times higher prices than India. Britishers were with the clear notion that if you were Briton in India then it didn't require much hard work to make money. The 400-carat gem, regarded as the best jewel in the world, was transported to Britain by Thomas Pitt, the governor of Madras at the time.

By bribing officials and ramping up the pressure, the British cleverly destroyed and undermined political institutions over the course of their long history of oppression, as Tharoor explains. Instead of developing self-government at the village level, they weekend village communities and set up central legislative bodies, whose members were unfamiliar with the Indian social institutions, which caused harm. One of the British people's most fundamental political beliefs was the divide-and-conquer strategy. Regarding Edward Said's opinions on Orientalism, Dr Dushyant Nimawatta writes in his book *Contemporary Critics and Critical Theories*, "Edward Said argues that the Europeans divided the world into the East and West. They made the distinction from their own point of view, dividing into us and them" (Nimawatta 189).

The motive behind approving this theory was to conquer all the states of India with the help of neighbouring Indian states. They started making a variety of policies depending on the behaviour and support they receive from the Kings. In this way, they were able to acquire India from all the parts.

In this book, Tharoor also discusses the inequality that persists in the Indian Civil Service in vivid and in-depth detail. Indians were excluded from every position, honour, repute, and office that even the lowest

Englishman could recognise. Jawaharlal Nehru once added the following, "The Indian civil service was neither Indian, nor civil, nor a service" (Tharoor 60).

Indians were not permitted to participate in this process where British people alone chose the fate of Indians. A few chosen Indians who served in the service have a long and terrible journey ahead of them. How they felt when confronted with a shocking amount of racism and how they were mistreated by British people. A few Indian servicemen in the imperial service had their brains significantly affected by this bigotry. Tharoor has discussed the real image of the plight of Indians concerning the judicial system's court system and penal law. Even while there existed law and order in India, justice was incredibly biased, especially when it came to disputes between Indians and Englishmen.

He has also discussed other instances where justice was rendered unjustly and how Indians suffered under the British judicial system. It was invented by a foreign race and imposed on Indians by them; neither its inception nor its implementation involved any consultation with Indians. They saw it as nothing more than a tool at their disposal. White people were the rulers since all the laws were in their favour, and Indians readily accepted them as their superiors. About racism, Dr Dushyant Nimawatta claims,

"Europeans claimed that they were a superior race to the people of the East. Thus they justified colonization and colonialism. They claimed that colonization aimed to civilize the uncivilized people of the East" (Nimawatta 189).

Under the British administration, racial discrimination was almost legal. Tharoor likewise says, "Justice, in British India, was far from blind: it was highly attentive to the skin colour of the defendant. The death of an Indian at British hands was always an accident, and

that of a Briton because of an Indian's actions always a capital crime" (Tharoor 106-7).

The way that Indians coexisted under British rule is beautifully depicted by Tharoor. There was a lot more diversity in social behaviour and no rigid caste structure. Additionally, there were no distinctions between Hindus, Sikhs, and Jains in various regions of the nation. In terms of eating habits, marriage, festival celebration, and religious observance, Hindus and Muslims in various regions of the country shared many social and cultural customs in common. The British found it tricky and difficult to divide them.

However, the British government's use of census in India made it clear for them to comprehend caste and religious disparities and their proportions to India's overall population. They grasped the new divide-and-rule policy based on the caste system through this categorical categorization based on the Indian census. They had mastered this technique by the later eighteenth century when they split Hindus and Muslims based on their respective religions. According to Tharoor, caste and racial tensions were less detrimental prior to the arrival of the British. Not only that, but the British also gave rise to disputes between the Shia and Sunni philosophies within the Muslim population.

But how did the Indian people embrace this caste rigidity so quickly and so thoroughly? Idrees challenges these historians with this important question. And finally, by invoking an alleged line of an imagined and valorised indigenous Indian heritage, as Dipesh Chakrabarty does, as "timeless and continuous, disrupted only by Colonialism," some Indian historians try to create an "original sense of Indian self-hood" and taste of fashion in an Indian nation.

The idea that the British ruled wisely and generously for the benefit of Indians is rejected by Shashi Tharoor. He discusses several famines and claims that more than three

crore people in India unnecessarily perished from malnutrition during the Raj to critique this version of "the enlightened tyranny." He also draws our attention to some excellent studies by Nobel Prize winner and academic Amartya Sen, who proved that famines are always preventable since they are caused by a lack of access to food rather than a shortage of manufacturing grain from India to international markets, including London.

While Indians were starving to death due to famines, Londoners were subsisting on Indian food. Tharoor uses Lieutenant Colonel Ronald Osborne, a first-hand witness, in his book to illustrate the horrifying position of the peasants:

"Scores of corpses were tumbled into old wells because the deaths were too numerous for the miserable relatives to perform the usual funeral rites. Mothers sold their children for a single scanty meal. Husbands flung their wives into ponds, to escape the torment of seeing the perish by the lingering agonies of hunger" (Tharoor 183-4).

The author also brings up forced migration for our attention. On British ships, people were forced to travel abroad. The author also mentioned that communal schools, which were operated by village communities at the time the British arrived in India, existed throughout the country. These communal schools were destroyed by the East India Company using force and resources, but little effort was made to rebuild them. The guru-shisha Parampara system of traditional Indian education was severely harmed by British education policies. Tharoor, a proud native of India, points out that five of the best educational institutions existed between the seventh and the twelfth centuries CE: Vikramashila, Nalanda, Somapura Mahavihara, Odantapuri, and Jaggadala. Additionally, Tharoor thinks that the British occupation was a major factor in the loss of oral teaching, which has long held a revered place in Indian culture. Additionally, they stopped teaching religious and mythological

writings, such as the Mahabharata and Ramayana, two immortal Indian epics that, at the very least, could have filled the same role in Indian classrooms as the Iliad and Odyssey did in British ones. Therefore, the British are the only ones to blame if Independent India was unable to carry on the tradition of teaching secular classics.

The most unforeseen event was that India's terrible famine occurred in the year 1770, which happened just thirteen years after the incubation of British occupation took, as a result of the British Raj's destruction of economic and political systems. It had a direct connection to a colonial policy that led to the starvation death of one-third of the Indian population. With the forceful sending of food grains for the battling British soldiers whilst the World War II, India once more experienced a famine in the 1940s.

The 65-year-old Tharoor is a member of a rich caste and family and is from the state of Kerala in southern India. He attended the Catholic Campion School in Bombay and later earned a master's in Law and Diplomacy from one of the famous universities which is Fletcher School in the United States of America. Later on, he prepared a PhD thesis on the foreign policy of the Indira Gandhi administration, which was eventually published in the book *Reasons of State* (1982). Further, it states that The Indian National Congress (INC) which is a moderate political party established in 1885 by Allan Octavian Hume who was a British civil servant and ornithologist, led the fight for the Independence of India from British domination and has governed the country since it attained independence for nearly 50 years. Currently, Tharoor is a part of the Indian parliament.

Contrary to pro-Hindutva ideologues, Tharoor views Muslims as fellow citizens rather than as historical foes. Muslims did conquer Indian lands, but they also lived there, made improvements, and claimed the country as their own. Tharoor is thus undoubtedly making a useful contribution to eradicating

certain unfavourable stereotypes about Muslims and their mediaeval history in the subcontinent in the current toxic environment of India. He mentions how, during the Mughal era, India's contribution to the global economy rose to an amazing 27 per cent.

Additionally, Tharoor condemns British contributions towards Indian society. He talks about the superior quality of Indian products, methods and ideas to the British. If there was any response, the British attempted to impose Victorian norms on Indians. Indian "traditional prices" were liberal by 21st-century standards. The development of newspapers was the one positive thing the British administration accomplished for India. On the other hand, the newspaper supported the dissemination of nationalist ideologies and aspirations. Tharoor claimed that the British Indians living in the colonies were only there to work and were completely under external control at every level of their lives. More than anyplace else, it alludes to how he describes the difficulties of caste formation in British colonial institutions. If, as Tharoor claims, caste structure evolves,

Why did this argument fall apart so quickly? Where in the non-colonial Hindu community may one find these ideal symbols established? Nepal, perhaps? What were the results of pre-colonial practices like child marriage, ritual sacrifice, mistreatment of widows, untouchability, and sati?

A nation with a rich culture, material richness, educational system, and variety is nothing more than a story of broken geography, unsteady people, and suffering. With the *Rear-View Mirror*, a mirror that reminds the British of their freedom to transport them back to the period of their atrocities and the Indians, Shashi Tharoor presents this story in great detail, with the aid of data. Indians of today did not exist during the colonial era. They previously dreamed of living in a free environment. The term "Dark Ages" refers to a period in history when colonial control was ruthless, and Indians

were forced to pay the price with their time, money, generosity, and blood.

Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* started as an eight-chapter discussion in Oxford, when a notable Indian speaker filed a lawsuit claiming reparations from Britain and India. Instead of asking for a big amount of money or a percentage of the British economy, Tharoor demanded a pound and a public apology for the next two hundred years. The apology, he claimed, would be very helpful.

This Indian on British territory, working for one of the most well-known firms in the world, the video went viral because it reminds the British of what they did and why they shouldn't be proud of it. The Indian penal empire gave our nation rules like the cut press, treason, and Article 377, all of which still have an impact on our nation today. In response to demonstrations against the ruling party, Tharoor said that 58 Indians were detained on treason and homosexuality accusations in just two years. In his renowned Oxford speech, Tharoor acknowledged the criticism. Being a part of the Indian National Congress, Tharoor: "The party that has misled India for six decades has always been insulated with pride, corruption, just like its British rivals.", as shared by Jonathan Foreman.

Tharoor acknowledged the validity of the criticism and stated, "History cannot be reduced to a game that contrasts the errors of various time periods. Every age must be broken down into its individual accomplishments and disappointments." This book refers to a time when we inhabited our own soil, consumed our own food, and inhaled air that nourished our lungs. Their age, however, makes them resemble the prisoners who were held in the Plato Cave, where their legs and necks were fixed and nothing, but shadows appeared on the wall nearby. However, their eyes lack light where we live. The shadows are realistic for them. If we stand outside that cave today, after being freed in India, and gaze at the sun, feeling its warmth, perhaps now is a good moment to

revisit that cave, see what that time was like, and draw lessons from it. The book is successful in drawing the reader to its pages. The author claims that the great history of colonial India showed no awe or regard for imperialism's founders. This book provides a different account of the empire's greatness, the victories it provided to India, and the colonial past that differs from the history that many of us have studied. He presents a compelling argument for India and clarifies the exploitation committed by the British in India using facts and data.

By dispelling the fallacy that India gained more from colonial authority than it lost, Tharoor exalts the history of the colonies. India formerly had a functioning economy, but once the British arrived, it saw its portion in the global economy fall to just 3% from 23%. According to Tharoor, several British policies were to blame for India's failing economic status. Tharoor summarised the benefits of colonial authority on the British through factual analysis as a by-product of an extraordinary system for the welfare of Indians or Indians.

Conclusion

This book, though, is important. At the time of writing, it was obvious that Tharoor had made the correct decision to argue against British authority in India with force and power rather than with efficiency. No literature that enumerated all the harm done to India during British rule existed until the middle centuries. By stating that there is a case for the British and other Western nations to answer, Tharoor fills the void. Old imperialism, with its renewed fervour and justifications for the same "civilization," never destroyed the planet, from remote regions like modern-day West Asia and the Middle East to now-forgotten Grenada.

What should the British do as a result? According to Shashi Tharoor, seeking compensation for past economic harm is not realistic or desirable for India and its citizens. Instead of monetary compensation, the best

course of action might be a sincere apology from the British.

colonialism is that the 'West' still occupies the position of an ideal state in the mind of the colonized people. Not only the lands but their minds were also being colonized. (121)

Works Cited

1. C., Sijo Verghese. "Art and Activism: A Study of Arundhati Roy's Writings from a Subaltern Perspective Mahatma Gandhi University, Kerala": Shodhganga, May 2009. Thesis
2. Durant, Will. *The Case For India*. Strand Book Stall, 2007
3. Ganie Tahira Mohd. "Review of An Era of Darkness". Aleph Book Company, 2018, pp. 1-7
4. [\(PDF\) Review of An Era of Darkness \(researchgate.net\)](#)
5. Justine, Sebin. "Shashi Tharoor's An Era of Darkness: The British Empire: Text and Context." *International Journal of English Language, Literature in Humanities* 7.4 (2019): 345-356.
6. Nimiwat, Dushyant. "Contemporary Critics and Critical Theories." Bareilly: Except Quotations from Elsewhere, 2017. Document.
7. Sharma, Saksham. "Book Review of the Era of Darkness" (DOC) Book Review of The Era of Darkness | Saksham Sharma - Academia.edu.
8. Tharoor, Shashi. *An Era Of Darkness*. Rupa Publications India, 2016.
9. Upadhyay, Ami. "Tharoor's Era of Darkness: The Saga of Suffering of Colonized India." *Alochana Chakra Journal*, vol. IX, issue IV, 2020, pp. 49-50.