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Revisioning History: Postcolonial Counter-Narratives and the Rhetoric of Redress in Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India*

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Abstract:

This paper undertakes a postcolonial literary and historiographical analysis of Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016), examining the text as an act of counter-historiography that dismantles the dominant colonial archive and re-centres the Indian subject within her own history. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Edward Said's *Orientalism*, Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of colonial mimicry and ambivalence, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's theorisation of subalternity and elite representation, Frantz Fanon's analysis of colonial violence and decolonial resistance, and Dipesh Chakrabarty's project of provincialising Europe, the paper argues that Tharoor's text performs a systematic deconstruction of the four principal myths of British colonial rule in India: the myth of economic beneficence, the myth of political and institutional gift, the myth of cultural civilisation, and the myth of racial neutrality. The paper doesn't, however, read Tharoor's text on its own terms. It acknowledges the representational complexities raised by Spivak's theorisation of the subaltern - particularly the question of whether an Anglophone, Oxford-educated politician genuinely recovers suppressed voices or substitutes one elite counter-narrative for another - and it engages with critical responses to the book's evidential and methodological limitations from historians like Irfan Habib, Zareer Masani and others. The paper further introduces the concept of "popular postcolonialism" as the text's defining generic mode: a form of engaged scholarship that makes decolonial critique legible to general readerships, performing the function of what Gramsci called the organic intellectual, while remaining subject to the representational limits that populist historiography inevitably entails.

Keywords: postcolonialism, postcolonial counter-narrative, popular postcolonialism, historiography, dismantle, subalternity, organic intellectual, colonial mythology, British imperialism.

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Introduction

When Shashi Tharoor stepped to the podium at the Oxford Union in May 2015 to argue the proposition "Britain Owes Reparations to Her Former Colonies," he was not merely delivering a parliamentary debate speech; he was performing a deliberate and highly public act of postcolonial counter-narration. The address went viral across the globe, generating millions of views and an unprecedented degree of international discussion about the legacies of British colonialism in India. *An Era of Darkness: The British Empire in India* (2016) grew from that speech: a book-length expansion and evidential substantiation of the compressed Oxford argument. Tharoor himself describes the text's motivation with characteristic double register: at once personally invested and committed to scholarly accountability. This duality - simultaneous advocacy and documentation - defines the text's character and, as this paper will argue, situates it within a distinct mode of postcolonial engagement that it is productive to call "popular postcolonialism."

Before proceeding to the text's analytical dimensions, it is necessary to register what "popular postcolonialism" entails as a critical category - and, equally, what it does not. Tharoor is an Anglophone, Oxford-educated politician of the upper-caste elite. He writes for a global readership in the language of the coloniser. His text has been celebrated in liberal metropolitan circuits and subjected to substantive critique by historians who challenge its evidential selectivity. These facts are not incidental; they bear directly on questions of voice, authority, and representation that postcolonial theory - Spivak's above all - has most rigorously interrogated. The paper therefore takes the text seriously as historiography while refusing to take it entirely on its own terms.

By "popular postcolonialism," this paper designates a mode of scholarly engagement that deploys the insights and methods of postcolonial critique in the register of accessible, evidence-rich, rhetorically compelling public argument - directed not at academic specialists but at the educated

general public. As a generic category, it is distinct from academic postcolonial theory (Spivak, Bhabha), from the academic subaltern historiography of the Subaltern Studies Collective, and from popular memoir or journalism. It occupies an intermediate zone: rigorous enough to mobilise archives, deploy economic data, and engage with scholarly controversy; accessible enough to generate millions of views on YouTube and sell out multiple editions. This category is introduced at the outset because it enables the paper's central double reading - appreciating the significant cultural and political work that *An Era of Darkness* performs while remaining attentive to the representational limits and ideological investments that structure that work.

The publication of *An Era of Darkness* in 2016 intervened in a specific and politically charged moment. In the United Kingdom, the Brexit debate had been accompanied by a resurgence of imperial nostalgia, including renewed defences of the British Empire by historians such as Niall Ferguson and Lawrence James. In India, the centenary of the First World War, the anniversary of the Amritsar Massacre, and intensifying debates about colonial-era statues had brought colonial history into the forefront of public discourse. Tharoor's text addresses this moment directly, positioning itself as a counter-argument to the apologists and revisionists who sought to rehabilitate the image of the Raj.

Postcolonial theory - as developed by Said, Bhabha, Spivak, Fanon, and Chakrabarty - provides the most productive analytical framework for reading *An Era of Darkness*, not because the text is itself a work of postcolonial theory, but because the questions it raises about representation, voice, knowledge, power, and the politics of historical narration are precisely those that postcolonial theory has most rigorously examined. This paper organises its analysis around the text's four principal argumentative strands - the economic, the political, the cultural, and the racial - while

attending throughout to questions of epistemological authority, generic character, and representational politics.

"Popular Postcolonialism" and the Question of the Organic Intellectual

The concept of "popular postcolonialism" requires sustained theorisation before it can function as a reliable analytical tool. It is distinguished, first, from academic postcolonial scholarship by its rhetorical address and its avoidance of theoretical jargon; second, from public history by its explicit ideological commitment to the critique of imperialism and the recovery of colonised subjectivity; and third, from what Antonio Gramsci describes as the work of the "organic intellectual" - though it shares with that figure the aspiration to speak on behalf of a dominated class from within the structures of a hegemonic culture.

Gramsci's organic intellectual, as elaborated in the *Prison Notebooks*, emerges from and remains organically connected to the social class whose interests and worldview they articulate - "translating" that class's experience into forms legible to broader publics and capable of generating consent or challenge within the ideological arena. Tharoor positions himself, self-consciously, in this role: he speaks as an Indian to a global audience, translating the historical experience of colonialism into a form that the English-speaking world can no longer deflect as specialist or arcane. The political effectiveness of this strategy is evident; the Oxford speech's viral reach demonstrated that accessible and evidentially grounded historical argument could rupture the complacency of empire-nostalgic public culture in ways that academic monographs rarely achieve. There are, however, important limitations to the Gramscian model as applied to Tharoor. Gramsci's organic intellectual speaks *from within* the subaltern class or social formation whose experience they articulate. Tharoor's position is considerably more ambiguous: he speaks *about* the subaltern from a position of significant social, educational, and political privilege. He is, in

Spivak's terms, a member of the postcolonial elite whose facility with the languages of Western scholarship enables him to advocate for those who cannot advocate for themselves in those languages - but who also, in doing so, inevitably mediates, selects, and reshapes the experiences he claims to represent. "Popular postcolonialism," as a generic mode, carries this constitutive tension within it and democratises postcolonial critique while encoding the class position of its author. This tension is not a reason to diminish Tharoor's contribution but to read and re-read it with critical awareness.

The Colonial Archive and Its Discontents: Tharoor's Method and Its Limits

Any serious postcolonial reading of *An Era of Darkness* must first reckon with how the text argues and not simply what it argues, because its political positions are rooted in a particular way of knowing and interpreting history. Moreover, the text's main argument is epistemological one. The organising intellectual gesture of Tharoor's work is one that postcolonial scholars, drawing on Said's foundational *Orientalism* (1978), would readily identify as a dismantling of the colonial archive: a sustained effort to lay bare the ideological assumptions, calculated omissions, and power-driven distortions that have shaped the dominant British account of India's colonial past. Said's great contribution was to show that Western knowledge of the East was never neutral scholarship but a mode of exercising authority - a "will to power" materialised through the act of representation, in which the Orient was constituted as a knowable, subordinate object and thereby rendered available to colonial governance (Said 3). Tharoor brings this Saidian framework to bear on the historiography of the British Raj, revealing how the hegemonic British narrative has positioned Indians not as people who suffered the violence of economic plunder and political dispossession, but as passive, even grateful, beneficiaries of a superior civilisation's generosity.

Chakrabarty's project of "provincializing Europe" is relevant here. Chakrabarty argues in *Provincializing Europe* (2000) that European historicism - the claim that European history is the universal standard against which all other histories are measured - is a form of epistemic imperialism that renders non-European historical experience as incomplete or merely derivative. Tharoor enacts a provincialisation of British imperial history by insisting that the story of the Raj is primarily a story about Indian suffering, dispossession, and resistance rather than British administrative achievement.

It is necessary, however, to register the substantial critical debate that *An Era of Darkness* has attracted - debate that a responsible postcolonial reading must engage rather than bypass. From historians, the most substantive challenge concerns Tharoor's use of economic data. The Angus Maddison GDP estimates that Tharoor deploys to demonstrate India's pre-colonial economic dominance are methodologically contested; Maddison himself acknowledged their reconstructive and speculative character for pre-modern periods. Historian Irfan Habib, while broadly sympathetic to the anti-imperialist argument, has noted the difficulty of building a strong evidential case from the kind of macro-statistical reconstruction that Tharoor favours. Critics such as Zareer Masani and others, writing from more conservative positions, have argued that Tharoor selectively emphasises evidence of colonial harm while minimising evidence of institutional contribution, and that his treatment of counterfactuals is largely rhetorical rather than rigorously historical.

More pointedly, the question of Tharoor's perspective as a sitting politician complicates the claim that *An Era of Darkness* constitutes a subaltern counter-narrative. The subaltern voices whose suffering the book catalogues - the Bengal famine victims, the indigo peasants, the textile workers displaced by colonial trade policy - do not speak in the text. They are spoken for, incorporated into an argument whose rhetorical and political goals are set by an elite agent writing in the coloniser's

language for a cosmopolitan readership. To acknowledge these limitations is not to dismiss the book; it is to read it as an instance of popular postcolonialism - rather than as a comprehensive and representative account of the colonial experience from the perspective of its victims - and to hold both the achievement and the limitation simultaneously in view.

Dismantling the Economic Myth: De-industrialisation and the Drain of Wealth

The economic argument of *An Era of Darkness* is its most extensively documented dimension, and it is here that Tharoor's popular postcolonialism is at its most forceful. Drawing on Dadabhai Naoroji's nineteenth-century drain theory and corroborating it with Angus Maddison's historical reconstructions, Tharoor contends that India's share of global GDP fell down from approximately twenty-three percent at the onset of British rule to just over three percent at independence - a catastrophic contraction attributed directly to the extractive logic of colonial governance. This argument, in Tharoor's formulation, rests on a simple causal claim: "India was governed for the benefit of Britain" (Tharoor 3). The rhetorical force of that brevity is itself a political gesture - a refusal of the complexity-as-alibi that colonial apologetics has routinely deployed.

The destruction of India's textile industry serves as the central exhibit. Tharoor demonstrates that India, before colonial rule, held roughly a quarter of global textile trade in the early eighteenth century - an industrial supremacy that was dismantled not by technological competition but by deliberate colonial policy: punitive tariffs on Indian cloth exports to Britain, combined with the flooding of Indian markets with Lancashire textiles at preferential rates. The artisanal economy was not outcompeted; it was legislated out of existence. Lord William Bentinck's own admission that the colonial policies had "bleach[ed] the plains of India" with the bones of cotton weavers (qtd. in Tharoor 19) constitutes, in postcolonial terms, a moment of archive recovery: the coloniser's own record testifying against the colonial enterprise.

Said's concept of Orientalism is relevant here. The colonial economic narrative required a discursive construction of Indian industry as primitive and Indian governance as incapable - representations that justified the "modernising" function of colonial economic policy. Tharoor's counter-narrative proceeds by demonstrating that the pre-colonial Indian economy was not the backward, stagnant condition that colonial apologetics have implied, but a sophisticated, outward-looking, and productive formation whose decline was directly caused by the mechanisms of colonial power, not by any inherent incapacity of Indian society.

A significant qualification must, however, be entered at this stage. The Maddison figures that Tharoor draws upon, though they usefully convey the rough magnitude of colonial appropriation, are burdened by wide margins of uncertainty for the pre-modern era - a limitation that Habib and other economic historians have been careful to register. To deploy these estimates as though they were precise historical measurements is to let the demands of persuasion override the demands of evidence. This is not a merely technical objection; it goes to the heart of how counter-historical arguments establish their credibility, and it raises the uncomfortable possibility that popular postcolonialism, in its understandable desire for rhetorical force, risks sacrificing the exactitude that scholarly history properly requires. The broad claim that colonial extraction drove India's underdevelopment stands on solid evidential ground; the specific statistical confidence with which Tharoor advances particular figures belongs more to the genre conventions of popular argument than to the protocols of rigorous scholarship.

The Spivakian question bears insistently on this section. The millions of weavers and peasant cultivators whose economic worlds were shattered by colonial policy appear in Tharoor's pages not as subjects capable of narrating their own histories but as anonymous casualties of structural processes described from above. They appear as statistical abstractions - falling percentage points

of global GDP, declining textile export figures. Tharoor's popular postcolonialism is most confident precisely where it is most quantitative - and most silent about the qualitative, experiential dimensions of colonial impoverishment that a subaltern counter-history would need to address. Drain theory and the Maddison data illuminate the architecture of exploitation with real analytical power; what lies beyond their reach is the lived texture of subaltern experience - the particular forms of adaptation, endurance, and resistance through which colonised people made sense of and responded to economic devastation, or found ways to navigate, subvert, and survive the colonial economic order from within.

Nevertheless, the economic counter-narrative represents a consequential intervention in the ongoing struggle over colonial memory. By establishing that Britain's Industrial Revolution drew substantial fuel from the systematic extraction of Indian wealth, and that the poverty India inherited at independence was a deliberately produced condition rather than a natural starting point, Tharoor effectively demolishes the foundational economic myth of colonial benevolence.

Dismantling the Political Myth: Democratic Institutions and the Fiction of Good Governance

Among the most persistent arguments deployed in revisionist defences of British colonialism is the contention that Britain's lasting gift to India was the architecture of democratic governance: parliamentary institutions, judicial independence, press freedom, and the rule of law. Tharoor devotes a substantial and closely reasoned section of the book to challenging this assertion. His central argument is that what colonial rule actually bequeathed were systems built and administered for the exclusive benefit of the colonising power, not the colonised population.

The railway system - perhaps the most frequently cited example of British colonial beneficence - receives a devastating revisionary analysis. Tharoor concedes and acknowledges that railways came into being under British administration, but demonstrates that their construction served

British rather than Indian purposes: they were laid primarily to move troops quickly in the event of insurrection, to draw raw materials from the interior toward the export ports, and to open the Indian interior to the penetration of British manufactures. Their financing depended on a guaranteed-return arrangement that exposed Indian taxpayers to all risks while channelling profits to British investors. The celebrated gifts of colonial modernity were, in this analysis, instruments of colonial accumulation dressed in the language of development. Tharoor addresses and confronts the democratic governance argument on two interconnected grounds: that Britain harboured no genuine intention of sharing democratic power with Indians, and that the Indian people, in their sovereign Constituent Assembly, made an autonomous choice to adopt the parliamentary form. The Constitution of 1950 was not an institutional inheritance passively received from a colonial patron but an act of deliberate collective self-determination. To represent the parliamentary system as a British gift is, in the vocabulary Said made available to postcolonial analysis, to reproduce the Orientalist condescension that denies the colonised world the capacity for independent political imagination.

Bhabha's concept of mimicry is productive and relevant here. The colonial political project required Indians to perform a version of British political culture - to adopt its forms of address, its bureaucratic procedures, its legal language - while being systematically excluded from its substantive power. This mimicry was always, in Bhabha's analysis, "almost the same but not quite" (Bhabha 86): close enough to flatter the colonial enterprise, different enough to justify continued tutelage. Tharoor's argument can be read as a denunciation of the structural hypocrisy that Bhabha's analysis makes visible: a colonial power that claimed to be teaching democracy while systematically practising its opposite.

Spivak's theorisation of subalternity, as developed in "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988), bears directly on this section's argument. Spivak argues that the task of the postcolonial intellectual is not simply to recover the subaltern's voice but to examine the structures of representation through which that voice has been systematically excluded from the historical record - and to be critically aware of the ways in which the intellectual's own act of recovery may reproduce those structures. Tharoor performs a version of the first task admirably: by exposing the ways in which the democratic institutions of colonial India were organised to exclude the Indian subject from genuine political participation, he demonstrates that the colonial political gift was always also a colonial political deprivation.

However, Spivak's second and more searching question - about who speaks, from where, and in whose name - is less comfortably resolved. The nationalist leaders who appear in Tharoor's political narrative as the legitimate representatives of Indian political aspiration were themselves, for the most part, members of the English-educated elite; the subaltern constituencies they claimed to represent - peasants, untouchables, tribal communities, women without access to nationalist politics - were the subjects of complex representational negotiations within the independence movement. When Tharoor speaks of Indians demanding self-governance, which Indians, precisely, are being referred to? What Tharoor offers is, more accurately, an elite counter-narrative that displaces the colonial elite narrative while remaining within the epistemological and rhetorical frameworks of the English-speaking world. Whether this displacement is sufficient to constitute a genuine recovery of subaltern historical experience is a question that the text raises but cannot - by virtue of its own institutional position - fully answer.

The Politics of Division: Communalism, Partition, and Colonial Responsibility

One of the most politically significant arguments in *An Era of Darkness* concerns the British role in the construction and exacerbation of communal divisions between Hindus and Muslims in the Indian subcontinent - a role that Tharoor argues was deliberate, systematic, and ultimately catastrophic. This argument directly contests what has become a powerful strand of colonial apologetics: the claim that British rule held in check an ancient Hindu-Muslim hostility that would otherwise have expressed itself in perpetual civil war.

Tharoor's case is built around the colonial strategy of divide and rule. He documents the deliberate amplification of Hindu-Muslim difference through separate electorates introduced by the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, the preferential treatment of one community over another at different points in colonial history, and the late-colonial strategy of encouraging Muslim League demands as a counter to Congress nationalism. The communal violence that accompanied India's partition was not the release of a pre-existing pressure but the outcome of a colonial political strategy that had worked, over decades, to construct religious identity as the primary axis of political mobilisation.

Bhabha's discussion of the colonial stereotype as a mode of knowledge and power can be applied here appropriately (Bhabha 94 - 95). Bhabha's argument that the colonial stereotype functions as a mode of knowledge and power by constructing the colonised as a "fixed", unchanging identity that is repeatedly asserted despite lacking proof and this stereotype operates through ambivalence - simultaneously recognizing and disavowing aspects of the colonised - to create a regime of truth that establishes hierarchy between coloniser and colonised. The census in Inda transformed a fluid and syncretic religious landscape into statistical rigidity: by counting Hindus and Muslims as separate, enumerable populations, it created the numerical basis for communal politics and ultimately for the ideology of partition. The coloniser simultaneously instigated the conflicts that

fragmented the colonised population and positioned himself as the neutral arbiter standing above the disorder he had created - the characteristic colonial double movement that Bhabha identifies as the structure of colonial ambivalence.

Fanon's analysis of the colonial strategy of division is equally relevant. In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Fanon argues that colonialism does not merely divide and conquer but actively constructs the categories of division - ethnic, religious, tribal - through which the colonised population comes to understand itself. The colonial investment in primordialism - in the fiction that these divisions are ancient and natural rather than historically produced - serves to deflect attention from their colonial origins. Tharoor's analysis follows precisely this Fanonian logic, and it constitutes what Fanon calls the decolonial project of "national consciousness": the intellectual work of recovering the pre-colonial history of solidarity and mutual accommodation that colonial discourse suppressed in order to validate its own claims to indispensability (Fanon 148 - 205).

The contemporary resonance of this analysis is substantial. In a political environment in which communal polarisation continues to be instrumentalised for electoral purposes, Tharoor's historical account of the colonial origins of that polarisation offers both a causal explanation and an implicit political argument. It is here, however, that his identity as a sitting Congress politician is perhaps most legible in the text - and here that the proximity between popular postcolonialism and partisan advocacy raises its most legitimate scholarly questions.

Dismantling the Cultural Civilisation Myth: Macaulay, Language, and the Colonised Mind

One of the most consequential aspects of British colonial rule in India was its systematic intervention in the domain of culture - the deliberate suppression, marginalisation, and delegitimisation of Indian languages, literatures, educational institutions, and epistemic traditions. The cultural civilisation myth - the colonial claim that British rule brought civilisation,

enlightenment, and education to a people mired in superstition, illiteracy, and intellectual stagnation - is contested by Tharoor with sustained force, and its dismantling deserves its own analytical attention.

The founding document of British educational policy in India, and the most notorious expression of the cultural civilisation myth, is Thomas Babington Macaulay's Minute on Education of 1835. Macaulay's declaration that a single shelf of good European literature was worth the entire native literature of India and Arabia combined provided the ideological justification for replacing existing systems of Indian education - in Sanskrit, Persian, and vernacular languages - with an English-medium curriculum designed, in his own formulation, to produce individuals who were "Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect." The goal was not the education of India but the production of a class of cultural intermediaries who would serve colonial administration while internalising the values and assumptions of the coloniser.

Tharoor argues that this policy had two catastrophic consequences. The first was the systematic denigration and marginalisation of India's existing educational traditions. The pre-colonial educational landscape included a dense network of indigenous institutions - madrasas, pathshalas, tols - that had sustained high levels of literacy and learning within their respective communities. Colonial educational policy, by withdrawing patronage from these institutions and redirecting resources toward English-medium schooling, did not simply introduce a new system; it actively displaced and delegitimised an existing one. Languages that had sustained rich literary and philosophical traditions - Sanskrit, Persian, Tamil, Bengali, Braj Bhasha - were removed from the curricula of official education, their association with learning severed and their social prestige systematically diminished.

The second consequence was what Fanon, in *Black Skin, White Masks*, describes as the colonisation of the mind. The substitution of English for indigenous languages as the medium of education and governance did not merely alter the linguistic landscape; it restructured the epistemic framework through which educated Indians came to know themselves and their world. To learn to think in English was, inevitably, to learn to see India through English eyes - to internalise the categories of colonial Orientalism, to measure Indian civilisation against European norms, and to find it wanting. Fanon's analysis of the psychological consequences of colonial language policy - the shame attached to the mother tongue, the aspirational identification with the coloniser's culture, the internalisation of inferiority - maps directly onto the cultural landscape that Macaulay's Minute produced in India.

This cultural argument connects directly to Said's analysis of Orientalism as a discourse that constitutes the colonised world as an object of knowledge to be managed, reformed, and improved by the West. The colonial educational policy that Tharoor analyses is, in Saidian terms, the institutional operationalisation of Orientalist discourse: it translates the abstract epistemological hierarchy of Orientalism into a concrete administrative apparatus that reorganises the colonised society's intellectual life in conformity with the coloniser's self-image as the bearer of universal civilisation. The "gift" of English education, like the "gift" of railways, turns out on inspection to be an instrument of extraction - in this case, the extraction of cultural capital and the destruction of intellectual autonomy.

The Spivakian question is sharpest here. Ngũgí wa Thiong'o's influential argument in *Decolonising the Mind* (1986) holds that writing in the coloniser's language constitutes a continuation of the colonial cultural relationship. Tharoor, writing in English and addressed primarily to an Anglophone audience, does not engage this dilemma - and the very medium of *An*

Era of Darkness places its author in an ironic relationship to his own argument. He argues, in English, for the damage done by Macaulay's English; he contests, in the coloniser's language, the cultural supremacy that the coloniser's language was designed to install. When Tharoor mourns the marginalisation of Sanskrit learning, the displacement of vernacular literary traditions, and the denigration of indigenous epistemologies, he does so as a product of the very educational system that Macaulay designed. The subaltern bearers of those marginalised traditions - the Sanskrit pandits who lost their students, the vernacular poets who lost their patronage, the artisans whose guilds were dissolved - do not speak in *An Era of Darkness*. Their loss is articulated by someone who has, by virtue of his formation, benefited from the cultural system that produced it. This is not to say the argument is wrong - the cultural destruction Tharoor describes was real and its consequences enduring - but it is to insist that the speaking position must be acknowledged as part of the analysis.

Colonial cultural policy also extended to the domain of religion and social practice. Tharoor examines how colonial interventions in the name of civilisation - the prohibition of sati, the regulation of temple practices, the patronage of reformist religious movements - served simultaneously to demonstrate colonial benevolence and to undermine the authority of indigenous social institutions.

The civilisational justification for colonial rule required that Indian society be represented as primitive; the reform project required that colonial authority appear as the indispensable agent of its elevation. Tharoor contests this paternalist logic by showing that India possessed living traditions of reformist thought - from the Bhakti movement through early nineteenth-century social reform - that were indigenous in their origins and owed nothing to colonial initiation. It is worth observing, though, that popular postcolonialism, by its very nature, tends toward argumentative

clarity at the cost of analytical ambivalence - a tendency that is simultaneously its rhetorical strength and its intellectual vulnerability. The history of colonial education is considerably more tangled than a narrative of straightforward cultural destruction can accommodate: the same English-medium institutions that Macaulay designed to produce a class loyal to colonial interests also educated Ram Mohan Roy, Rabindranath Tagore, B. R. Ambedkar, and Jawaharlal Nehru - figures who redirected the intellectual resources of their colonial formation into the project of dismantling colonial power. This observation does not invalidate Tharoor's critique; it introduces complications that the text's myth-and-counter-myth structure sometimes tends to smooth over.

Dismantling the Racial Myth: White Supremacy and the Ideology of Imperial Difference

The fourth colonial myth that *An Era of Darkness* addresses is perhaps the most fundamental: the racial ideology that constructed the colonised as inherently inferior - intellectually, morally, and biologically - and the coloniser as naturally suited to rule. This racial myth was not merely an incidental prejudice but a structuring ideology of colonial governance, one that justified differential treatment before the law, exclusion from positions of authority, and the violence of racial humiliation as everyday instruments of colonial control.

Tharoor documents the pervasiveness of racial exclusion in colonial India: the clubs and railway carriages marked "Europeans Only," the systematic refusal to promote Indians to senior positions in the Indian Civil Service regardless of examination performance, and the legal double standards that reserved severe punishment for Indian offences while treating European crimes leniently. These are not marginal anecdotes; they are evidence of a racial architecture that structured every dimension of colonial social life. Tharoor's formulation is characteristically crisp: "Justice, in British India, was far from blind: it was highly attentive to the skin colour of the defendant" (Tharoor 175).

Said's *Orientalism* is quite relevant here. The racial myth required the discursive construction of the Indian as irrational, emotional, untrustworthy, and incapable of self-governance - representations that functioned simultaneously as justification for colonial rule and as a guarantee of the coloniser's racial superiority. Tharoor reads the colonial archive against the grain of its own representations, demonstrating that many of the qualities attributed to Indians by colonial discourse were not reflections of inherent characteristics but effects produced by the conditions of colonial subjection itself.

The treatment of colonial violence reaches its most devastating register in Tharoor's account of the great famines of the colonial period, in which an estimated thirty-five million people perished under British governance. These famines are interpreted not as natural calamities that exposed the limits of an imperfect administration, but as predictable and frequently avoidable outcomes of deliberate colonial economic policy: the continued export of grain even during mass starvation, the unrelenting collection of land revenue from starving peasants, and an ideological attachment to free-market doctrine that foreclosed timely state intervention. Mike Davis's *Late Victorian Holocausts* (2001) provides the scholarly context for this analysis, arguing persuasively that famine deaths were attributable to specific policy choices made within the colonial administration rather than to the uncontrollable operations of natural forces.

Tharoor's views and analysis of the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre of 1919 is particularly searching. What gives Amritsar its deepest significance in his reading is not the atrocity alone but the character of the British public reaction that followed: substantial sections of British opinion hailed Dyer as a defender of empire, and the House of Lords formally endorsed his conduct. This response illuminates, with uncomfortable clarity, the racial logic that organised the colonial political imagination: that Indian lives occupied a lower value in the moral calculus of British imperial

consciousness, and that their destruction could be justified in the name of preserving colonial order. Fanon's analysis of colonial violence as the foundational logic of the colonial world - the violence that creates and maintains it by separating the zones of the colonised and the coloniser - finds its most explicit historical illustration in Tharoor's account of these atrocities (Fanon 3 - 9). Fanon's phenomenological analysis adds a dimension that Tharoor's more evidential approach does not fully develop. For Fanon, the violence of racism is not merely external and institutional but internal and psychological: it installs itself in the colonised subject's own self-perception, producing a divided consciousness in which the colonised person simultaneously occupies the position of the human subject and the position of the racialised object of the colonial gaze. The recovery of dignity and subjectivity that decolonisation requires is, for Fanon, necessarily a violent and rupturing process - a claim that Tharoor, committed to democratic and legal frameworks of redress, largely sets aside. His reparations argument implicitly proposes institutional and economic remediation of colonial harm; Fanon's analysis suggests that the psychic harm of racial subjection may not be so straightforwardly reparable.

Undefined as "Popular Postcolonialism": Contemporary Relevance

An Era of Darkness occupies a distinctive and significant position within the broader landscape of postcolonial discourse, and any adequate assessment of its contribution must address its specific generic character. It is not a work of academic postcolonial theory; it does not engage systematically with the theoretical vocabulary of Bhabha, Spivak, or Fanon, though its arguments are continuous with theirs. It is a work of popular postcolonialism, as defined in the introduction: a mode of scholarly engagement that deploys the insights and methods of postcolonial critique in the register of accessible, evidence-rich, rhetorically compelling public argument. This generic positioning is not a limitation but a specific political choice: by writing a book that can be read by

a general educated audience rather than one restricted to academic specialists, Tharoor democratises the tools of postcolonial critique, making them available as instruments of public political discourse.

The Gramscian aspiration of popular postcolonialism - to speak on behalf of the colonised to a global audience - is both its strength and its representational problem. Gramsci's organic intellectual arises from within the social formation whose interests they articulate; Tharoor's voice is emphatically not the subaltern's voice. It is an elite, English-educated voice speaking about the subaltern's experience in institutional spaces - Oxford, the Indian Parliament, global publishing - from which the subaltern remains largely excluded. This does not render his argument invalid, but it does complicate the claim, made or implied in some readings of the text, that *An Era of Darkness* constitutes an act of subaltern counter-historiography in any straightforward sense.

The contemporary relevance of *An Era of Darkness* is manifest in several dimensions. In the United Kingdom, the text intervenes directly in the ongoing debate about the legacy of empire and the question, whether the British school curriculum should include a more honest account of the Raj's history. In India, it provides historical grounding for political demands relating to colonial-era reparations and museum repatriations. In the broader global discourse about colonial legacies - from the Black Lives Matter movement's engagement with the history of slavery to the debates about the Benin Bronzes in European museums - it offers a model of historically grounded, rhetorically persuasive counter-narrative.

The question of reparations, with which Tharoor's public intervention began, is the text's most direct engagement with the political implications of its historical argument. Tharoor's demand is famously modest - the symbolic sum of one pound per year from Britain to India, to acknowledge the moral debt rather than to attempt a literal financial restitution - but the modesty of the demand

should not obscure the seriousness of the moral and political claim it encodes. The demand for reparations is, in postcolonial terms, a demand for recognition: a demand that the history of colonial violence, economic extraction, and cultural suppression be acknowledged as such, rather than continued to be mystified as a civilising mission or an institutional gift.

Conclusion

Shashi Tharoor's *An Era of Darkness* is a work of considerable historical and political significance whose full implications can only be grasped when it is read through the lens of postcolonial theory, and read critically rather than celebratorily. The text performs, across its chapters, a systematic dismantling of the four principal myths through which British colonial rule in India has been retrospectively justified: the myth of economic beneficence, exposed by the evidence of deliberate deindustrialisation and systematic wealth extraction; the myth of political gift, exposed by the racialised character of colonial justice and the deliberate exclusion of Indians from genuine democratic participation; the myth of cultural civilisation, exposed by the evidence of Macaulay's programme, the displacement of indigenous educational traditions, and the psychological colonisation of the educated elite; and the myth of racial neutrality, exposed by the overwhelming evidence of racial hierarchy and violence that the colonial system institutionalised.

This paper has argued throughout that the critical framework of popular postcolonialism requires a double reading. The Spivakian question - who speaks, from where, and in whose name - is not resolved by Tharoor's text; it is, rather, enacted by it. *An Era of Darkness* speaks powerfully on behalf of the colonised, but the colonised who speak most clearly in its pages are those whose experiences can be quantified, documented, and argued about in the language of Anglophone public reason. The peasant famine victim, the dispossessed weaver, the silenced vernacular intellectual - these figures appear in the text as evidence of colonial harm but not as agents of their

own counter-narration. The subaltern, in Spivak's formulation, cannot speak in *An Era of Darkness* because the text does not create the conditions in which subaltern speech would be possible.

This is a structural limitation of popular postcolonialism as a genre, not merely of Tharoor's individual text. The accessible, rhetorically marshalled form that makes popular postcolonialism effective as a political intervention - that enabled Tharoor's Oxford speech to go viral and *An Era of Darkness* to reach audiences that would never read Spivak or Fanon in the original - is precisely the form that forecloses the radical heteroglossia, the irresolvable ambivalence, and the patient attention to subaltern difference that a genuinely emancipatory postcolonial discourse would require.

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