

Governance, Ethics, and Narrative Form in Contemporary Indian Fiction: A Comparative Study of Shashi Tharoor and Vikas Sharma

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comprehensive comparative study of the thematic concerns and narrative strategies in the works of Shashi Tharoor and Vikas Sharma, focusing on governance, ethics, media influence, identity, and socio-political critique. While Sharma's novels-*IAS Today*, *Medicine: Light in Twilight*, and *Sana*-are rooted in realism and procedural clarity, emphasizing institutional responsibility and professional ethics, Tharoor's *Riot*, *Show Business*, and *The Great Indian Novel* employ satire, allegory, and non-linear storytelling to interrogate political culture, historical continuities, and social fragmentation. Through a detailed analysis of narrative structure, literary devices, characterization, and socio-political commentary, this paper argues that both authors, despite their stylistic divergences, converge in their exploration of moral responsibility and systemic accountability. Literature, in this context, emerges as a powerful medium for critiquing governance and examining the ethical dimensions of contemporary Indian society.

Keywords: Ethics, Governance, Identity, Media, Realism, Satire.

Introduction

Contemporary Indian English literature has increasingly functioned as a critical site for examining the intersections of governance, ethics, identity, and socio-political realities. Among the writers who significantly contribute to this discourse are Shashi Tharoor and Vikas Sharma. Although their literary approaches differ in style and structure, both authors are deeply invested in exploring how institutions, cultural systems, and individual agency interact in shaping social outcomes.

Vikas Sharma's novels are characterized by realism, linear narrative progression, and a strong focus on professional environments such as bureaucracy, healthcare, and media. His works foreground ethical dilemmas faced by individuals within institutional frameworks, emphasizing procedural clarity and accountability. In contrast, Shashi Tharoor adopts a more experimental and layered approach, employing satire, allegory, intertextuality, and non-linear storytelling to critique political systems, cultural practices, and historical continuities.

This paper seeks to comparatively analyse selected works of both authors to examine how their thematic concerns-particularly governance, ethics, media influence, and identity-are articulated through distinct

narrative strategies. By situating their works within broader literary and theoretical frameworks, the study highlights the complementary nature of their contributions to contemporary Indian literature.

Governance, Ethics, and Public Welfare

A central thematic convergence between Tharoor and Sharma lies in their exploration of governance and its impact on public welfare. In *Riot*, Tharoor presents a nuanced depiction of communal violence, emphasizing how political manipulation, administrative inertia, and institutional failure contribute to social unrest. The novel underscores the human cost of governance failures, portraying how ordinary citizens suffer due to delayed responses, lack of accountability, and prioritization of political interests over public safety.

Tharoor's treatment of governance is inherently socio-ethical. By employing multiple perspectives, including those of journalists, administrators, and common citizens, *Riot* constructs a fragmented yet comprehensive picture of societal breakdown. The non-linear narrative structure reinforces the complexity of causation, illustrating how historical grievances, political decisions, and individual actions intersect to produce social crises.

In contrast, Sharma's *IAS Today* and *Medicine: Light in Twilight* approach governance from a procedural and institutional perspective. His narratives focus on the day-to-day functioning of bureaucratic and medical systems, highlighting how individual decisions within these frameworks directly affect public welfare. Ethical dilemmas are presented in concrete terms, often involving conflicts between institutional protocols and personal conscience.

For instance, in *IAS Today*, the protagonist navigates bureaucratic constraints while striving to implement policies that benefit the public. The narrative emphasizes accountability, transparency, and ethical decision-making, illustrating how governance operates at the intersection of individual agency and systemic limitations. Similarly, *Medicine: Light in Twilight* explores healthcare ethics, depicting the challenges faced by medical professionals in balancing patient care with resource constraints and institutional pressures.

While Sharma's approach is grounded in realism and procedural detail, Tharoor's is broader and more symbolic, highlighting systemic failures and moral ambiguities. Together, these perspectives underscore that governance is not merely a structural mechanism but a moral enterprise, where both individual integrity and institutional accountability play crucial roles.

Media, Culture, and Public Perception

The role of media as a mediator of public perception is another significant area of convergence between the two authors. In *Sana*, Sharma examines the interaction between media and bureaucracy, portraying media as both a tool for transparency and a potential source of misinformation. The novel highlights the ethical challenges faced by journalists and administrators, emphasizing the need for responsible communication in maintaining public trust.

Sharma's depiction of media is grounded in realism, focusing on procedural aspects such as press briefings, information dissemination, and crisis communication. The narrative illustrates how misrepresentation or sensationalism can distort public perception, leading to misunderstanding and social tension. By situating media within the framework of governance, Sharma underscores its role as a crucial component of democratic accountability.

Tharoor's *Show Business*, on the other hand, adopts a satirical approach to media and culture. By portraying Bollywood as a microcosm of society, the novel explores how media constructs identities,

shapes cultural norms, and commodifies social narratives. The interplay between reality and performance highlights the mediated nature of modern existence, where public perception is often shaped by spectacle rather than substance.

Through satire, Tharoor critiques the commercialization of culture and the ethical compromises inherent in media production. Characters in *Show Business* navigate a world driven by ambition, fame, and public validation, revealing the tensions between personal identity and societal expectations. The novel also examines how media narratives reinforce social hierarchies and influence collective consciousness.

Despite their differing approaches, both authors emphasize the ethical responsibility of media as a social institution. Sharma's focus on procedural communication complements Tharoor's critique of cultural representation, offering a comprehensive understanding of media's impact on society.

Identity, Society, and Individual Aspirations

Identity formation is a central concern in the works of both Tharoor and Sharma, though it is approached from different perspectives. Sharma's narratives focus primarily on professional identity, exploring how individuals define themselves through their roles within institutions. Characters in *IAS Today*, *Medicine: Light in Twilight*, and *Sana* grapple with the tension between personal values and professional responsibilities, illustrating the ethical dimensions of identity.

In Sharma's works, identity is closely tied to duty, accountability, and moral integrity. The protagonists' sense of self is shaped by their ability to navigate institutional challenges while maintaining ethical standards. This emphasis on professional identity reflects Sharma's broader concern with the moral responsibilities inherent in public service.

Tharoor, in contrast, explores identity through cultural, national, and historical lenses. In *The Great Indian Novel*, identity is constructed through the interplay of mythology and politics, with characters embodying both historical figures and mythological archetypes. This intertextual approach highlights the continuity of social and political patterns, emphasizing how identity is shaped by historical and cultural contexts.

In *Riot*, identity is portrayed as fragile and contingent, influenced by communal affiliations, political loyalties, and social pressures. The novel illustrates how social conflict disrupts individual identities, forcing characters to navigate complex moral and emotional landscapes. Similarly, *Show Business* explores identity as a performative construct, shaped by media representation and societal expectations. The comparative analysis reveals that while Sharma emphasizes identity as ethically grounded and institutionally defined, Tharoor presents it as fluid, socially constructed, and historically contingent. Both perspectives highlight the interplay between individual agency and social context in shaping identity.

Narrative Techniques and Structure

Narrative structure plays a crucial role in shaping thematic expression in the works of both authors. Sharma's narratives are predominantly linear, characterized by chronological progression and clear cause-and-effect relationships. This approach enhances realism and facilitates a structured exploration of ethical dilemmas.

In *IAS Today* and *Sana*, the linear narrative allows readers to follow the development of events and understand the consequences of decisions within institutional frameworks. Flashbacks and parallel plots are used sparingly, primarily to provide context without disrupting narrative coherence. This emphasis on clarity and procedural detail aligns with Sharma's focus on realism and ethical accountability. Tharoor's narrative techniques, in contrast, are marked by complexity and experimentation. His use of non-linear

storytelling, intertextuality, and multiple perspectives creates layered narratives that invite active reader engagement. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the blending of mythology and modern politics through intertextual references produces a rich, multi-dimensional narrative.

Similarly, *Riot* employs fragmented narratives and shifting perspectives to depict communal violence, reflecting the complexity and unpredictability of social crises. *Show Business* uses episodic structure and parallel plotlines to capture the fragmented nature of media culture and celebrity life.

The contrast between Sharma's linear realism and Tharoor's non-linear complexity highlights different narrative priorities. While Sharma emphasizes clarity and accessibility, Tharoor foregrounds thematic depth and interpretative engagement. Both approaches effectively serve their respective thematic concerns, demonstrating the versatility of narrative form in contemporary literature.

Literary Devices and Language

The use of literary devices and language further distinguishes the works of Tharoor and Sharma. Tharoor's writing is characterized by satire, irony, humour, and allegory, which he employs to critique political and cultural systems. His language is dynamic and rhetorically rich, enabling him to blend entertainment with critical commentary.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, satire and allegory are used to reinterpret historical events, while *Show Business* employs humour and irony to critique media culture. Even in *Riot*, where the tone is more pathetic, irony is used to highlight the disconnection between political rhetoric and social reality.

Sharma's language, in contrast, is formal, precise, and descriptive, reflecting the professional contexts of his narratives. His use of realism and detailed narration enhances the credibility of his depiction of institutional processes. Literary devices such as symbolism and metaphor are used sparingly, primarily to reinforce thematic concerns rather than to create allegorical layers.

The contrast in language and literary devices reflects the authors' differing narrative goals. Tharoor's stylistic approach engages readers through wit and complexity, while Sharma's language ensures clarity and accessibility, facilitating a deeper understanding of ethical and procedural issues.

Characterization and Point of View

Characterization and narrative perspective are integral to the thematic development of both authors' works. Sharma predominantly employs third-person narration, allowing for an objective portrayal of institutional realities. His characters are grounded in realism, with their development closely tied to professional and ethical challenges.

In *IAS Today* and *Medicine: Light in Twilight*, protagonists are depicted as morally conscious individuals navigating complex institutional environments. Supporting characters serve to contextualize these environments, reflecting the broader social and organizational dynamics.

Tharoor's approach to characterization is more diverse and experimental. He employs multiple points of view, including first-person narration, to provide psychological depth and social commentary. Characters in his works often function as both individuals and symbolic representations of broader societal forces.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, characters embody mythological archetypes, while in *Show Business* and *Riot*, they represent various facets of media culture and social conflict. This layered characterization enhances the thematic richness of Tharoor's narratives, allowing for a multi-dimensional exploration of identity and society.

Socio-Political Commentary

Both Tharoor and Sharma use their narratives as vehicles for socio-political critique. Sharma's works focus on institutional challenges, including bureaucracy, healthcare, and media, presenting social issues as practical problems requiring ethical solutions. His emphasis on realism and procedural detail provides a grounded understanding of governance and public welfare.

Tharoor's critique, on the other hand, is broader and more symbolic, addressing issues such as political corruption, communalism, and cultural practices. Through satire and allegory, he highlights systemic inequalities and moral ambiguities, encouraging critical reflection on societal structures.

The complementary nature of their approaches provides a comprehensive perspective on contemporary Indian society. While Sharma offers insight into the functioning of institutions, Tharoor critiques the broader socio-political landscape, illustrating the interconnectedness of individual actions and systemic forces.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Shashi Tharoor and Vikas Sharma, despite their stylistic and methodological differences, share a common commitment to exploring the ethical and socio-political dimensions of contemporary Indian life. Sharma's realism and procedural clarity provide a grounded understanding of institutional functioning, while Tharoor's satire and allegory offer a critical lens for examining cultural and political systems.

By analysing narrative techniques, thematic concerns, and socio-political commentary, this paper highlights the role of literature as a powerful medium for critiquing governance and exploring the moral complexities of modern society. The works of both authors underscore the importance of ethical accountability at both individual and institutional levels, reinforcing the enduring relevance of literature in addressing contemporary challenges.

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