

Article

A Critical Rereading of Meghna Pant's *The Man Who Lost India* as Dystopian, Feminist, and Postcolonial Allegory

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Abstract:

This paper is a qualitative literary analysis of Meghna Pant's speculative novel titled *The Man Who Lost India* (2024) which depicts a war that occurred between India and China in 2032, resulting in the occupation of India and the creation of an authoritarian nation-state named "New China" (Pant). The study takes as its interpretive frameworks postcolonial theory (Said, Bhabha), structuralist method (Barthes), and feminist criticism (Atwood), which examines the novel as a drama of imperial domination, erasure of local culture and patriarchal control through its invasion plot, forbidden love affair, and supernatural intervention (Pant). The analysis method is based on the close reading of the primary text and is complemented by published reviews and interviews with the author and is done in six phases according to Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke). It is claimed that Pant constructs a very "desi dystopia" where the sacred Shiv Linga of the village of Lalbag is used as a postcolonial symbol of cultural sovereignty and grassroots survival in the face of cultural genocide (Pant). Pant's ongoing fascination with gender inequity and women's agency under both patriarchal and imperial pressure is read as a feminist act of defiance, as the taboo romance between Ida and Manu is the other story (Pant). The novel is also compared to Orwell's 1984, Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* and Prayaag Akbar's *Leila*, and it fits in with the sweeping dystopian genre and the increasing body of South Asian speculative fiction (Orwell; Atwood; Akbar). While critics have praised it for its topicality and emotional impact, others have pointed out some pacing issues, a weak supernatural aspect, and lack of character development ("The book that wanted to be a movie"; "Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel"). Though flawed in many aspects, the novel is nevertheless an important addition to Indian speculative fiction and deserves more attention in the field where literature, postcolonial studies, and geopolitics intersect (Pant).

Keywords: Dystopian Fiction, Postcolonial Theory, Feminist Resistance, Cultural Erasure, South Asian Speculative Fiction, Meghna Pant, Sino-Indian Conflict

1. INTRODUCTION

With a fragile military situation in the eastern Ladakh region and growing strategic competition, experts fear a new conflict between India and China may be triggered between 2025 and 2030. This is the real-world worry

that *The Man Who Lost India* (2024), by Meghna Pant, sets its imagined catastrophe of a 2032 war against China which results in India's defeat and its annexation by China and which brings the human cost of such a war to the forefront (Pant). With a focus on both the speed of conquest and the systematic destruction of a country's cultural landscape, the novel explores the consequences of conquest by way of the story of its individual characters, their families, and their communities (Pant). Pant's novel is an opportune reminder that unchecked nationalism and imperial aspirations have dehumanizing effects, at a time when the rest of the world's major powers already grapple with resource scarcity, climate displacement and competing ideologies (Pant).

Born in Shimla and brought up in Delhi and Mumbai, Meghna Pant is a decorated Indian author, journalist, screenwriter, feminist campaigner and TEDx speaker, whose oeuvre always revolves around themes of gender, social injustice, identity and endurance ("Meghna Pant - Wikipedia"). She has won awards such as the Muse India Young Writer Award and was shortlisted for the Commonwealth Short Story Prize and is considered one of the leading contemporary writers in India, primarily for her fiction and advocacy on women issues (Pant; "Bio - Meghna Pant"). As a financial journalist, she has worked for CNBC, Bloomberg TV India, and more, and honed her narrative-charging skills when she transitioned to full-time fiction ("Meghna Pant - Times of India").

In all her work Pant becomes a sort of social provocateur. Winner of the Muse India Young Writer Award, her debut novel *One and a Half Wife* (2012) is a journey of Amara Malhotra's quest for self-determination and an exploration of immigrant identity and marriage inequalities (Pant). In her nonfiction work (2018), *Feminist Rani*, she collects women empowerment dialogues and challenges what she considers "fake feminism," for a more genuine equality (Pant). *Boys Don't Cry* (2022) takes on domestic abuse and toxic masculinity, while *The Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Good News* (2021) mocks the pressure within the family on reproductive decisions and values personal autonomy (Pant). In all these pieces Pant's investigation of unfair systems is interwoven with personal narrative and even more broadly with social criticism — a pattern that culminates in a more speculative fashion in the *The Man Who Lost India* (Pant).

The Man Who Lost India, by Simon & Schuster India (320 pages, 15 February 2024), paints a picture of the disastrous war of 2032 that begins when China runs out of resources, and soon enough leaves India in a conquered state under the rule of a new regime that takes firm control of Indian administration, economy, culture and people (Pant). The story ends in a remote Punjabi village of Lalbag, preserved from destruction by a supernatural occurrence related to a sacred Shiv Linga; it's a pocket universe of love, betrayal and survival (Pant). Pant combines elements of war thriller, supernatural mystery and pointed social commentary, allowing him to examine issues of colonization, resilience and the loss of one's identity in a distinctly South Asian context, and to do so in a novel way in the context of contemporary fiction on geopolitical unease (Pant).

The Man Who Lost India explores the personal toll of war and of entrenched inequality, questioning nationalism and power structures, and offering a map of the feminist struggle to resist cultural erasure, a struggle that could be said to be a speculative fiction, as well; it's a testament to how speculative fiction can be a powerful vehicle to interrogate geopolitical futures and present day anxieties in a postcolonial world (Pant).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

To date, the critical reception of *The Man Who Lost India*, mostly popular reviews and early critical responses, reveals a rather mixed but nonetheless enthusiastic response to the novel's intentions ("The book that wanted to be a movie"; "Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel"). Its emotionally charged narration, particularly the illicit affair between the servant Manu and his mistress Ida, is often hailed as a testament to intimate power in the midst of larger chaos (Pant). Its portrayal of the surveillance, forced cultural conformity, and near-enslavement of the occupied is also given credit for delivering a biting critique of the dehumanizing machinery of imperialism (Pant).

Meanwhile, more substantive objections have been raised about the novel's believability and its realization. Some critics doubt the feasibility of Indian identity being completely lost within ten years, and feel that the underdeveloped supernatural plot and its neat denouement mar the reader's experience ("The book that wanted to be a movie"). Some readers have found the novel to be one-sided or jingoistic because of stereotyped depictions of Chinese characters, which seem to be xenophobic, and lack of nuance in the handling of the conflict ("Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel"). Some also find the novel's feminist agenda underdeveloped, as the secondary female characters are often objectified in ways that perpetuate patriarchy despite Ida's efforts to be an independent woman (Pant). There's pacing too, the novel starts out fast and then slows down to a crawl once it

settles in Lalbag, with some plot elements not developed to the fullest extent.

Obviously inspired by the surveillance and propaganda apparatus in George Orwell's *1984* (1949), Pant's novel borrows from Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985), which is about a forbidden relationship and oppression of women (Orwell; Atwood). But it does stand out in its distinctly "desi dystopian" mode that does not entirely ignore the Indian regional particularity and Hindu mysticism, and which is similar to new Indian dystopies like *Leila* (2017), dealing with the themes of authoritarianism and communal fracture, by Prayaag Akbar (Akbar). It also places the novel in a South Asian context of magical realism similar to that of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), in which myth is used to reflect on the nation of India (Rushdie).

In her earlier fiction her consideration of feminist issues permeates in a consistent manner. *One and a Half Wife* (2012) follows Amara's path to self-emancipation from an unequal marriage; *Feminist Rani* (2018) is about systemic gender harm; and *Boys Don't Cry* (2022) focuses on toxic masculinity and domestic violence (Pant). The same themes appear again in *The Man Who Lost India* when the female characters are subjected to similar psychological stresses and betrayals in a war story that is otherwise dominated by male characters, though, as mentioned, some of the novel's feminist potential is undermined by its objectification (Pant).

Academic discussion about its geopolitical allegory, postcolonial implications, and feminist undertones, is still too meager and confined to the passing reference of the novel in larger studies of Indian fiction. The novel could be compared in depth with other dystopian works of literature around the world, the feminist and the postcolonial issues could be explored more, and the novel could be adapted for the screen, which would allow a more thorough analysis of its subtext regarding identity and power (Pant).

3. METHODOLOGY

It is a qualitative study that uses the literary criticism and close textual analysis methods to look at *The Man Who Lost India* as a work of dystopian speculative fiction, in terms of its narrative structure, thematic content and prose style (Pant). Three approaches — postcolonial theory, structuralism, and feminist criticism — are used to interpret the novel and provide insights into the novel's reflections on geopolitical tension, cultural erasure, and human endurance (Said; Bhabha; Barthes; Atwood).

The main source is the novel itself, which is 320 pages long, and the secondary sources are from *Mint Lounge*, *bookGeeks*, *Medium*, *Mid-Day*, and *The Blogchatter* reviews and author interviews and information on Pant's official website (Pant; "The book that wanted to be a movie"; "Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel"). The findings have been supplemented by other research on dystopian narratives in Indian fiction and feminist issues in Pant's work, as well as background materials on India-China relations (Pant).

Once students started to read closely, they began to notice common symbols (especially the Shiv Linga as a symbol of the supernatural fight against oppression), dialogue and descriptive sections relating to oppression and internal struggle (Pant). For the interrogation of imperial authority, hybridity, and resistance, postcolonial theory was used, which was based on Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) and Homi Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994) (Said; Bhabha). Structuralist analysis drew upon a method developed in Roland Barthes's *Mythologies* (1972) for identifying binary oppositions (conqueror and conquered, natural and supernatural, passion and duty) which structure the novel's narration (Barthes). The analysis of female agency and the combination of gender, class and war was done through feminist criticism, based on Pant's thematic preoccupation and the way Atwood has dealt with the analysis of gender (Atwood; Pant). Thematic coding was conducted using the six steps of the model proposed by Braun and Clarke which involved familiarity with the material, initial coding (e.g. around cultural erasure and forbidden love), searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining the themes, and reporting the results (Braun and Clarke).

To minimize interpretive bias, interpretations were checked against secondary sources; all interpretations were backed up with textual evidence and critical commentary (Pant; "The book that wanted to be a movie"). The novel was also compared with the dystopian classics Orwell's *1984* (1949) and Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) and with *Leila* (2017) by Akbar for comparison with Indian speculative fiction (Orwell; Atwood; Akbar).

4. PLOT STRUCTURING AND STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW

The Man Who Lost India is set in 2032, where a world war resulting from China's resource shortages leads to its speedy conquest and the establishment of a totalitarian "New China" with absolute control over administration,

the economy, culture and demographic processes (Pant). India has been invaded, and all is looted, there is ubiquitous surveillance, public executions, and a concerted effort to eradicate Indian culture, including the forced suppression of Bollywood films (Pant).

The advance of the occupying forces is inexplicably stalled at the tiny Punjabi village of Lalbag where what seems like a miracle, a divine intervention, connected with a sacred Shiv Linga on Maha Shivratri night, makes the village the final sanctuary of independence within the sea of destruction (Pant). Now, four years later, as the Chinese army tries again to break down Lalbag's walls, there is dissension within the community when a Chinese officer uncovers a dangerous secret threatening to tear apart the village's mysterious wall (Pant).

The story's central focus is the wealthy Seth family; the second richest man in the town, Seth, is dealing with illusions wrought by wealth, his wife Kamala, his son Vakil and his daughter, the celebrated beauty of the town, Ida, is embroiled in a tangle of personal conflicts (Pant). At the heart of the novel is the forbidden attraction between Ida and Manu, the son of a servant, which is the one thing to tear them apart as illness, madness, betrayal and the Chinese officer's investigation descend upon them (Pant). In a family tragedy, the homes are looted, relationships broken under the watchful eye of the state, and the characters are beset by illness, madness, and tragedy as much as they are buoyed by strength, love and survival (Pant).

Narrative structure. The novel is written in the third person, and the narration alternates between the epic of a dystopian war thriller and the familial melodrama, always keeping the Seth family and the occupied India as a localized, contained world at the centre of the narration (Pant). Geopolitical invasion, personal relationships, moral dilemmas, and the supernatural are entangled in plot lines, which are sometimes explored in story-within-a-story sections exploring the relationship between Ida and Manu (Pant). The tempo starts off fast – news bulletins, explosions, society on the verge of being swarmed by zombies – and then changes to a more reflective beat as the setting moves to Lalbag, which is sometimes limiting and dragging (“The book that wanted to be a movie”). Tension is steadily wound up towards a climactic convergence, albeit with some unexpected turns and several character arcs left underresolved with the story moving forward (Pant).

Stylistic devices. Pant's style is easily readable and filmic, capturing scenes with Bollywood vibrancy, with chapter titles that evoke the scene to come and the inclusion of poetry, shlokas, and quotations that emphasize the attack on cultural heritage (Pant). Sharp, economical dialogue reveals character through a sarcasm, prose relies on dark socioeconomic metaphors, including hybrid phrases like “ni-maste,” a blend of Chinese and Hindi to indicate a loss of identity (Pant). The end product is a genre-bending mix of science fiction, political thriller and magical realism that, despite the disquieting and philosophical tone, has an uneven balance of “highbrow” and “lowbrow” reference points (Pant). The strengths of the novel are its richly imaginative and pictorial quality and its generally unified plot; the weaknesses are inconsistent pacing, some forced plausibility, and a supernatural element that is sometimes clumsily inserted (“The book that wanted to be a movie”; “Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel”).

5. THEMATIC ANALYSIS

5.1 Dystopian Oppression and Imperial Control

Pant has fashioned a vivid dystopian world, a world of violence and cultural domination that forms present day fears of geopolitical instability and cultural suppression (Pant). China, faced with the impending shortage of resources, declares war in 2032, and the narrative unfolds as people are looted and plundered, and the very nature of conquest turns dehumanizing (Pant). The resulting occupation is based on surveillance, executions, demographic manipulation and forced assimilation, making India a colonized state under the banner of New China (Pant).

This oppression is central to cultural erasure. The prohibition of Bollywood cinema along with the process of Indian identity being systematically erased, demonstrates concerns of linguistic and religious uniformity, with the occupiers attempting to rewrite history and extinguish local customs to cement their rule (Pant). This is reflected in the air in the novel; when the war comes to an end at the last moment, as Lalbag is on the verge of destruction, its implications of occupation are much more than physical, and go on to create a psychological terror (Pant).

Postcolonial reading. A novel that is postcolonial in its reading through postcolonial theory, which was originally formulated in the context of European colonialism, is set in a hypothetical Sino-Indian scenario, where economic

and political domination is intertwined with resistance (Said; Bhabha). The suppression of Indian language, religion, and culture by New China is similar to Said's description of *Orientalism*, in which the dominant culture renders the subordinate culture as lesser than itself and seeks to justify and maintain control over it.

Structuralist reading. Binary oppositions (conqueror-conquered, order-chaos, the natural-the supernatural) shape the way power is treated throughout the novel; the dystopian fears that permeate the novel are not about stand-alone occurrences but about systemic hierarchy (Barthes). The devices enable Pant to magnify, sometimes by a thousandfold, real-world events, such as the standoff over the Ladakh border, to suggest a warning against the power of imperialism to chip away at cultural autonomy (Pant).

5.2 Love, Gender, Feminist Resistance

Forbidden love and gender are themes that combine with the dystopian craziness of the novel to portray love as a place of resistance and a source of profound tragedy, and to project the feminist dilemma of female characters between love and obligation (Pant; Atwood). The core dynamic between Ida and Manu is a forbidden and volatile one that will prove to be disastrous for both families, a dynamic that plays out as a drama of desire against social constraint in a war-torn society (Pant). Ida's eventual descent into madness after being betrayed, represents the emotional burden borne by women between the polarities of personal agency and expected patriarchy (Pant).

Despite the oppression, there remains female agency. Harsh is an arranged husband for Ida, presented as a way out of the situation for the family, and his attraction to Manu is a quieter suggestion of self-determination, but one that is echoed throughout Pant's work as a whole, as women are turned into commodities during times of crisis (Pant). In one of the pivotal passages of the novel, a voice states that Ida is a woman "clashed between love and duty"—a very apt description of the love-versus-duty struggle that exists in a patriarchal system (Pant).

Feminist application. This is a double resistance: to imperialism and to patriarchy, and where love becomes a way to recover identity in the midst of cultural annihilation (Atwood; Pant). The binary "passion versus duty" reflects the other binaries in the novel and uncovers how gender roles are enveloped in a system of oppression (Barthes). In this context, love does not simply console, but instead is a rejection and refusal of the gendered burden of duty in dystopian society, a concern that crops up in Atwood's fiction around issues of gendered totalitarianism (Atwood).

Pant employs supernatural elements in the novel as signposts of survival and cultural continuity, invoking the magic realism that implies God's grace can stave off complete annihilation in the face of colonization (Pant). The novel's main mystery, the miraculous act of the Shiv Linga on Maha Shivratri, which somehow prevents Lalbag from being overrun, serves as a symbol of divine care and stops the invasion of the village, granting some form of sanctuary and a cultural identity to resist oppression (Pant). The supernatural – water turns to blood, etc. – unsettles the fragile tranquil of the village, rendering the supernatural as protector, harbinger of tragedy, keeper of secrets and amplifier of the characters' inner turmoil (Pant).

This mysticism is buttressed throughout the narrative, for instance, in the abrupt and unexplained end of the war at the border of Lalbag, where mysticism is presented as a barrier to the imperial (Pant). This supernatural current has been cited as a device that lends the novel its atmosphere of unease as psychic disturbances intervene in the novel's social order and are used as a metaphor for the indomitable human spirit ("Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel").

Postcolonial and mythological interpretations. From a postcolonial perspective, these aspects may be interpreted as an allegory of resistance to erasure by hybridity, in that the survival of the supernatural is based on indigenous mythology and that it is used to repel the neocolonial powers (Bhabha; Said). The force of protection of the Shiv Linga makes the novel a cultural response to erasure; it is an invocation of Hindu symbolism that is a claim to spiritual sovereignty for India (Pant). Structurally analyzed, the constant clash of the natural and the supernatural will be taken as a sign of cultural vigilance in relation to psychic events (Barthes). Overall, the novel finds hope in this supernatural survival, a testament of the indomitable strength of identity in the dystopian threat (Pant).

6. CRITICAL RECEPTION

The novel is generally felt to address real concerns of the modern, and is written on an ambitious level, if not without some weaknesses ("The book that wanted to be a movie"; "Decoding Meghna Pant's Dystopian War Novel"). It has garnered special acclaim for its emotional resonance, its rich characters, and its exploration of

political discomfort (Pant). Meanwhile, the critics have pointed out flaws in pacing, improbability, stereotyped characters and jingoistic overtones that prevent a more nuanced approach to the conflict (“The book that wanted to be a movie”; “Decoding Meghna Pant’s Dystopian War Novel”).

The book is nonetheless a valuable contribution to Indian speculative fiction, one of the earliest of “desi dystopias” that deal directly with current geopolitical fears, and rooted in local mysticism (Pant). Its feminist aspects are resonant with Pant’s work in general and the possibilities for engaging in gender oppression in crisis narratives (Pant). However, other than popular reviews and passing bibliographic mentions, its geopolitical allegory, postcolonial aspects, and feminist implications remain largely under-researched in the academic world (Pant).

7. CONCLUSION

The Man Who Lost India (2024) by Meghna Pant is a sustained exploration of dystopian anxiety, geopolitical crises, and human resilience, with invasion, cultural erasure, and supernatural intervention all contributing to speculations on potential directions that India-China tensions may take (Pant). The novel, which focuses on the microcosm of Lalbag, draws a thread through oppression, gender, love and mystical survival, highlights the dangers of nationalism and power imbalance, while never losing sight of an indomitable human spirit amidst the collapse of society (Pant). While its cinematic style and character-driven intensity are its strong points, it also has genuine flaws in pacing and plausibility, resulting in a bold, flawed addition to the genre of Indian speculative fiction (“The book that wanted to be a movie”; “Decoding Meghna Pant’s Dystopian War Novel”).

Critical response reinforces the novel’s relevance to present-day fears, its feminist concerns reinforce Pant’s previous work, and its themes are similar to the dystopian work of other global writers (Pant; Atwood; Orwell). As well as pointing to the causes of war and colonisation, the novel also alludes to resilience and the reader is called upon to think about the importance of solidarity in the face of division (Pant). Geopolitical realities constantly evolve and the novel’s cultural significance is likely to remain with us for years to come; there is still plenty of space for more research on the potential and threats of a globalised world through speculative fiction (Pant). This research must be complemented by future works that fill the current gaps in the field and foster greater interdisciplinary dialogue between literature, politics and cultural studies in analyzing the future-oriented anticipation and criticism offered by speculative fiction (Pant).

8. STUDY IMPLICATIONS

The novel can be used as a means of reflection on diplomacy, to encourage empathy and awareness which can contribute to reducing tensions relating to occupation, since the human costs of conflict are often much more evident in the novel than in policy discussions (Pant). It also pushes the boundaries of Indian dystopian fiction by combining sociopolitical critique with supernatural elements, broadening the scope of the genre to accommodate indigenous mysticism and cultural hybridity, and perhaps stimulating more ambitious work in the field of South Asian fiction (Pant).

Feminist dimensions. As a forbidden love story, and as a novel that depicts women’s empowerment during crisis, the novel’s exploration of gender serves as a valuable tool for gender studies interested in the ways the experience of passion can be a form of resistance in dystopian context (Atwood; Pant). It is also a story about love and loss, and resilience against impossible odds, which can also provide insights into post-conflict recovery and the maintenance of identity in a split community (Pant).

8. FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Further research could be done on comparing it with other dystopias of today’s India, for instance, Gautam Bhatia’s *The Sentence* (2025), to explore the common themes of societal collapse and rebellion in postcolonial settings (Bhatia). In turn, intersectional scholarship might ask yet more questions about the way female agency is treated in Pant’s work and how it relates to further questions of empowerment (Pant; Atwood). The geopolitical allegory of this novel may also be analyzed in the context of the actual tensions found in the Himalayas by thinking in international relations from a literary perspective, in terms of how public attitudes toward diplomacy and nationalism are formed by literature (Pant). In conclusion, its cinematic potential calls for adaptation studies that would have to contend with transposing its supernatural elements, as well as its theme of cultural erasure, into the medium (Pant).

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Author(s) Contribution

All the authors contributed equally to the preparation of the manuscript.

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The authors declare that Grammarly was used only as a writing aid to assist with language refinement and drafting support. The authors reviewed and approved the final manuscript and take full responsibility for its content.

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Not Applicable

Human Ethics and Consent to Participate

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