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A critical analysis of Meghna Pant's the man who lost india: dystopian allegory, gender resistance, and cultural erasure in speculative fiction

Nikita Yadav

Research Scholar

Dept of English and Modern European

Languages

Banasthali Vidhyapeeth

nikitayadav1226@gmail.com

Dr. Mandvi Singh

Professor

Dept of English and Modern European

Languages

Banasthali Vidhyapeeth

mandvisingh@banasthali.in

Article History

Received: 24 April, 2026

Revised: 17 May, 2026

Accepted: 29 May, 2026

Published: 5 June, 2026

Abstract

This paper presents a qualitative literary analysis of *The Man Who Lost India* (2024) by Meghna Pant, a speculative dystopian novel set in 2032 that envisions a Sino-Indian war resulting in the occupation of India and the creation of a totalitarian "New China." Drawing on postcolonial theory (Said; Bhabha), structuralist analysis (Barthes), and feminist criticism (Atwood), the study examines how the novel critiques imperial oppression, cultural erasure, and patriarchal power through its narrative of invasion, forbidden love, and supernatural resistance. The methodology employs close textual reading supplemented by secondary sources including critical reviews and author interviews, with thematic analysis conducted through Braun and Clarke's six-step framework. The analysis reveals that the novel constructs a distinctively "desi dystopian" world in which Hindu mysticism — embodied in the protective Shiv Linga of Lalbag — functions as a postcolonial allegory of cultural sovereignty and indigenous resilience against neocolonial erasure. The forbidden romance between Ida and Manu serves as a feminist site of resistance, reflecting Pant's established engagement with gender inequality and female agency under patriarchal and imperial constraint. Comparative readings with 1984 (Orwell), *The Handmaid's Tale* (Atwood), and *Leila* (Akbar) position the novel within both global dystopian tradition and the emerging canon of South Asian speculative fiction. While critical reception acknowledges its emotional resonance and geopolitical relevance, concerns regarding pacing inconsistencies, underdeveloped supernatural integration, and stereotypical characterisation are also noted. The study concludes that the novel constitutes a significant, if imperfect, intervention in Indian speculative fiction and calls for deeper interdisciplinary scholarly engagement at the intersection of literature, postcolonial studies, and geopolitics.

Keywords: *dystopian fiction, postcolonial theory, feminist resistance, cultural erasure, South Asian speculative fiction, Meghna Pant, Sino-Indian conflict*

1 INTRODUCTION

With the backdrop of increasing geopolitical tensions along the Line of Actual Control (LAC), observers have predicted a possible armed conflict in the Himalayan region between India and China between

2025 and 2030 due to the fragile balance of power in Eastern Ladakh and the dangers of a second India-China war fueled by territorial claims and strategic insecurities.¹ Such a bleak prospect is a reflection of the dystopian future in the novel *The Man Who Lost India* (2024) by Meghna Pant, in which a fictional war in 2032 causes a fictional annexation of India by China, highlighting the human and social cost of such

tensions through a narrative that is a blend of invasion, occupation, and supernatural intervention.² The premise of the novel, which is built in the context of fast conquest and cultural destruction, is the speculation about the instability of national boundaries, and the novel explores the deepest effects on the lives of individuals, families, and communities. With the world superpowers struggling to find balance between the lack of resources, climatic migrations, and ideological conflicts, the work by Pant is a well-timed allegory, which cautions of the dehumanizing effects of uncontrolled nationalism and imperialism.³

Born in Shimla and brought up in Delhi and Mumbai, Meghna Pant is a multiple award-winning Indian writer, journalist, screenwriter, feminist activist, and TEDx speaker whose work has always focused on exploring the themes of gender relations, social inequities, identity, and human endurance.⁴ Pant is one of the most contemporary writers in India, having won awards like the Muse India Young Writer Award and shortlisted in the Commonwealth Short Story Prize, among others, because of her literature and campaign against gender issues. She started her career in financial journalism, working as an editor of business magazines and writing in such magazines as CNBC and Bloomberg TV India, which helped her develop her skills in breaking down complex socio-economic problems and then switched to full-time creative writing.⁵ This background gives her stories a sharp commentary on the power structures, inequality, and personal agency.

The work of Pant makes her a social change agent. Her debut novel, *One and a Half Wife* (2012), examines immigrant identity and marital inequalities through protagonist Amara Malhotra's journey toward self-liberation, earning the Muse India Young Writer Award. The non-fiction work *Feminist Rani* (2018) features conversations on women's empowerment, critiquing "fake feminism" and advocating for authentic gender equality. *Boys Don't Cry* (2022) tackles domestic violence and toxic masculinity, while *The Terrible, Horrible, Very Bad Good News* (2021) satirises family pressures on reproductive choices, emphasising autonomy. In

these, Pant questions the inequalities of the systems and combines personal accounts with larger social commentary—a technique that culminates in *The Man Who Lost India* in a more speculative form.

The Man Who Lost India is a 320-page speculative fiction novel about the events in 2032, published on February 15, 2024, by Simon and Schuster India, which imagines a disastrous war that occurred due to the resource crises in China, which left India in an immediate state of defeat and occupation by a new regime that enforces complete control over culture, economy, and everyday life. The story stops in the distant Punjabi village of Lalgag because of a supernatural event of a Shiv Linga, forming an oasis of opposition, where the lives of individuals of love, betrayal, and survival are narrated. This inter-genre mix, combining war thriller, supernatural mystery, and incisive social commentary, enables Pant to explore the theme of colonization, resilience, and identity loss in a distinctively South Asian setting, as a critical intervention in the current literature on geopolitical anxieties.⁶

By highlighting the human cost of war and the systematic inequalities, *The Man Who Lost India* criticises nationalism and power structures and the resilience and feminist resistance to cultural erasure, making speculative fiction one of the most crucial instruments to question geopolitical futures and modern anxieties in the post-colonial world.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Criticism of *The Man Who Lost India* that has been published to date, including that of popular reviews and early literary criticism, is of mixed but substantive interest to the ambitions of the novel. Its captivating storytelling and emotional appeal, especially the forbidden love between servant Manu and mistress Ida, are always positively reviewed as an expression of intimate strength in the larger upheaval.⁷ The surveillance and cultural imposition along with the slavery-like conditions of the occupation portrayed in the novel earn the novel critical acclaim as a sharp critique of the dehumanising mechanisms of empire.⁸ Nevertheless,

some serious criticisms arise in terms of plausibility and implementation. The fact that by the year 2032, the Indian identity will be erased in the nearest future puts a strain on the credibility of critics, as the lack of development of the supernatural integration and the unnatural solution to the problem destroys the immersion.⁹ Other critics call the novel jingoistic and one-sided, with stereotypical portrayals of Chinese characters bordering on xenophobia, which takes away the ability to explore conflict in a nuanced way.¹⁰ Feminist overtones are perceived to be shallowly supported by supporting characters, especially women, where objectification helps to uphold patriarchal values despite Ida trying to act as an agent.¹¹ The problem of pacing occurs in the middle parts of the novel, where the lack of freedom in Lalbag results in boredom, whereas the pace is too fast at the beginning of the story, and the plot lines are not developed.

In comparative context, Pant's novel draws on dystopian traditions established by *George Orwell's 1984* (1949) in its portrayal of surveillance and truth manipulation under totalitarian rule, and Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* (1985) in exploring forbidden relationships and gender oppression amid societal collapse. However, it distinguishes itself through "desi dystopian" flavours incorporating Hindu mysticism and regional identities, aligning with emerging Indian dystopian works like Prayaag Akbar's *Leila* (2017), which explores authoritarianism and communal strife.¹⁴ This places the novel in the traditions of South Asian magical realism similar to *Midnight's Children* (1981) by Salman Rushdie where mythology is intertwined with history to comment on the national identity.¹⁵

In terms of the previous works of Pant, the feminist undertones are present throughout her works. *One and a Half Wife* (2012) explores marital inequalities through Amara's journey toward self-liberation, while *Feminist Rani* (2018) critiques systemic gender harm. Works such as *Boys Don't Cry* (2022) explore the issue of toxic masculinity and domestic violence in patriarchal societies. These motifs are reflected in *The Man Who Lost India*, where women characters have to manoeuvre betrayal and insanity in a world of

war dominated by men, even though critics observe that objectification waters down feminist possibilities.¹⁶

Even the critical engagement of the novel does not fill research gaps. Little critical attention—beyond bibliographic references in surveys of Indian literature—restricts academic discourse on its geopolitical allegory, postcolonial aspects and feminist resonances. It can be rigorously compared to global dystopias in future studies, its feminist intersections with postcolonial theory can be examined, and its cinematic potential can be analysed, covering opportunities of subtle subtext on identity and power.¹⁷

3 METHODOLOGY

The present study uses a qualitative research method, which is based on the literary criticism and textual analysis to explore *The Man Who Lost India* by focusing on narrative, thematic, and stylistic aspects of dystopian speculative fiction. The interdisciplinary approach is based on the postcolonial approach, structuralist theory, and feminist criticism to unravel the commentary of the novel on the geopolitical tensions, the cultural erasure, and the human resilience.

The primary data will be the 320-page novel¹⁸ and will be complemented by the secondary sources like book reviews in the Mint Lounge,¹⁹ bookGeeks,²⁰ Medium,²¹ Mid-Day,²² and The Blogchatter.²³ They are contextualised by author-related materials, such as interviews and an official site by Pant.²⁴ The articles on Indian dystopian literature and feminism in the fiction of Pant were included,²⁵ as well as the background materials about the relations between India and China.²⁶

The close reading of the novel revealed repetitive symbols (Shiv Linga as supernatural resistance), conversations, and descriptions of passages that depict oppression and self-war. Based on the works of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and Homi K. Bhabha (*The Location of Culture*, 1994), postcolonial theory studied imperial authority, cultural hybridity

and resistance.²⁷ The binary oppositions (conqueror/conquered, natural/supernatural, passion/duty) of structuralism were based on *Mythologies* (1972) by Roland Barthes, and used to uncover patterns of narration.²⁸ The female agency and gender-class-war intersections were examined in feminist criticism that was inspired by the established themes of Pant and gender explorations of Atwood.²⁹ Thematic analysis was based on the six steps of the model of familiarisation, first coding (cultural erasure, forbidden love), theme searching, review, definition, and reporting, introduced by Braun and Clarke.³⁰

Cross-verification of the interpretations was done with secondary sources to reduce bias, and the claims made are supported by textual evidence and critical interaction. Comparative analysis juxtaposed the novel with dystopian classics (*1984* by Orwell, 1949; *The Handmaid's Tale* by Atwood, 1985) and Indian works (*Leila* by Akbar, 2017).³¹

4 SUMMARY AND STRUCTURAL OVERVIEW OF THE PLOT

The Man Who Lost India is set in the year 2032 and describes a devastating war caused by the resource crises in China that resulted in the rapid conquest and the creation of a totalitarian state of New China that has strict control over administrative, economic, cultural, and demographic spheres.³² The invasion leads to rampant looting, surveillance, executing people in the streets, and eradicating the Indian cultural identity by forcefully assimilating the local culture such as Bollywood movies.³³

Nevertheless, the progress miraculously stops at Lalbag, a small Punjabi village sheltered by a supernatural miracle a divine intervention connected to a sacred Shiv Linga in Maha Shivratri that provides magical protection, turning it into the final hold of independence in the face of all the destruction around it.³⁴ Four years later, when Chinese forces renew their attempts to break the defences of Lalbag, internal conflict breaks out after a dangerous secret found out by a Chinese cop is threatening the mystical protection.³⁵

It is about the wealthy family of Seth, who lives in their bungalow The White Taj: the second-richest man in the town, Seth, who struggles with the illusions of wealth; his wife Kamala, his son Vakil and his daughter Ida, the town beauty caught up in personal conflicts.³⁶ The central theme is an illicit relationship between Ida and Manu, the son of a servant that destroys two families amid the mounting dangers of illness, insanity, betrayal, and the investigation by the Chinese cop.³⁷ The story ends with familial devastations in the form of home raids, forced separation, relationship-breaking under the surveillance, and curses such as illness and insanity, increasing the overall descent into tragedy and discovering human aspects of strength, affection, and survival.³⁸

Narrative Structure: The novel uses the third-person narration, with the perfect combination of dystopian war thriller magnitude and family drama closeness, which is achieved by the combination of multiple perspectives of the narrator, focusing on the Seth family, and the small world that is occupied India.³⁹ The plotlines are interwoven, with geopolitical invasion opposing personal relationships, ethical struggles, and magical events, and story-within-a-story elements are used to explore the affair between Ida and Manu.⁴⁰ Pacing starts with high-stakes action, interrupted headlines, explosions, a society on the brink, and then switches to deliberate, reflective cadence where being locked up creates angst, sometimes making the narrative tedious, restricting exploration outside of local boundaries.⁴¹ The tension is built up to climactic convergence with unpredictable twists, but the lack of development arcs is caused by the rush of forward movement.⁴²

Stylistic Devices: The prose style of Pant is fluid and cinematic, with the scenes being vivid and action-packed and being Bollywood-inspired, with distinctive chapter titles that provide an idea of what is imminent, interspersed poetry, shlokas, and quotations emphasising attacks on heritage.⁴³ Several short, sharp exchanges expose the depths of character under a veil of sarcasm, using dark metaphors of social-economic decay, such as Chinese English and mixed words such as ni-maste, to show a loss of

identity.⁴⁴ The hybrid style is a combination of science fiction, political thriller, and magical realism, which form disturbing or philosophical tone, but conflicts with the incorporation of highbrow references with lowbrow ones.⁴⁵ The strengths are colourful idiosyncrasies and imaginative richness with unified and captivating plotting; weaknesses arise in discrepancies in pacing and unnatural plausibility, and supernatural fusions are artificial.⁴⁶

5 THEMATIC ANALYSIS

5.1 *Dystopian Oppression and Imperial Control*

The novel by Pant is a vividly created dystopian world that uses violent means of war and dominance of other cultures to portray the modern society fear of geopolitical instability and cultural oppression.⁴⁷ The story starts with the declaration of war in China in 2032, which is caused by the lack of resources and leads to the mass pillage and plunder as a symbol of the dehumanising impact of conquest.⁴⁸ This invasion creates imperial dominance by surveillance, executions, demographic engineering, and turning India into a colonised nation under the New China, and destroying sovereignty by forced assimilation.

The fundamental process of oppression is cultural erasure. Bans on local customs, like Bollywood movies, and the systematic destruction of Indian identity, are indications of the anxieties of linguistic and religious homogenization, in which the occupiers rewrite the past and eradicate native ways of doing things to consolidate power.⁴⁹ This is highlighted in atmospheric descriptions, such as the quote that states that the war is abruptly stopped when a supernatural event rescues the obscure town of Lalbag, which is about to be destroyed by the war, but the consequences of war go beyond the physical to the psychological terror.⁵⁰

Postcolonial Analysis: The novel critiques the mechanisms of imperialism through the postcolonial theory, adjusting the paradigms that centred on European colonialism to speculative Sino-Indian situation where economic and political dominance and exploitation are intertwined with resistance.⁵¹

This annihilation of Indian language, religion and culture under new China is similar to the idea of Orientalism by Said where the dominant nations develop subordinate cultures as inferior in order to dominate them.⁵²

Structuralist Interpretation: The binary oppositions of conqueror/conquered, control/chaos, natural/supernatural organise the exploration of the power relations in the narrative, showing how the dystopian fears are embedded in the hierarchical structures of the system instead of single events.⁵³ These elements help Pant to overstate the reality about tensions in the real world such as Ladakh border skirmishes to caution against the ability of imperialism to destroy cultural autonomy.

5.2 *Love, Gender, and Feminist Resistance*

Love and gender themes are overlapped by dystopian chaos, which depicts the element of forbidden romance as a place of resistance and a place of deep tragedy, as well as emphasises the feminist undertones of the female characters who have to balance passion and duty. The main story of Ida and Manu, a forbidden and violent love, that breaks the boundaries of classes, and finally kills two families, highlights the destructive nature of desire and social limitations in war-torn societies.⁵⁴ The resultant descent into madness by Ida after betrayal is a symbol of emotional burden on the women who are torn between personal agency and patriarchal demands.⁵⁵

The female agency creates gender dynamics even in the face of oppression. The fact that Ida was arranged to marry Harsh to escape the family situation as an example of commodification of women in a crisis but her interest in Manu is a sign of subversive demands on self-determination, reiterating the theme of gender inequality in the rest of the oeuvre of Pant.⁵⁶ One of the most important quotes summarises this conflict: "Ida, a woman who is undecided between love and duty, takes centre stage, which depicts the conflict of passion and duty in patriarchal structures."⁵⁷

Feminist Theory Application: This is a dual resistance of imperial oppression and patriarchal control where love is a miniature of identity reclamation during cultural erasure.⁵⁸ The binary passion/duty is structurally symmetrical to the bigger oppositions, showing how the gender roles are formed into the oppressive systems. Therefore, love is not just the comfort, but the feminist rejection of the gendered weight of duty in dystopian societies, in line with the gender issues of totalitarianism explored by Atwood.⁵⁹

6 SUPERNATURAL AND CULTURAL RESILIENCE

Pant incorporates supernatural motifs as signs of strength and preservation of identity, in which magical interventions protect against complete elimination in colonised worlds, and the magical realism is combined with survival motifs. The central enigma—the inexplicable sparing of Lalbag through a supernatural intervention involving a Shiv Linga on Maha Shivratri—is a symbol of divine protection, which stops invasion and forms an immunity enclave as the embodiment of eternal cultural identity in the face of oppression.⁶⁰ The psychic moments like the characters turning water into blood break the delicate peace and emphasise the supernatural powers as the saviours and harbingers of tragedy, secret keepers of the town, and magnifiers of inner struggles.⁶¹

The mystical strength is highlighted in the text: the war is suddenly stopped by a mystical event that rescues the small town of Lalbag that is on the brink of destruction⁶² and the mysticism is shown as the fortification against the imperial powers. Critiques note the supernatural undertoning that emphasises the disturbing mood, and psychic powers that interrupt the breakdown of society and represent the human spirit strength.⁶³

Postcolonial and Mythological Readings: These aspects are allegorized using postcolonial readings as they resist the erasure of hybridity, which is a supernatural survival that employs indigenous mythology to challenge neocolonial power.⁶⁴ The Shiv Linga as protective power places the novel as

cultural response to erasure with Hindu symbolism to claim spiritual sovereignty of India. Naturally/supernatural oppositions are structurally disclosed to find patterns of underlying meanings, psychic events are indicators of cultural guarding.⁶⁵ Finally, there is hope in the supernatural survival, which is the tenacity of identity in the face of dystopian threat.

7 CRITICAL RECEPTION

The contemporary critical opinion confirms the topicality of the novel in reflecting contemporary fears and adds that it is performed on a grand scale, but not without flaws. Such aspects as emotional resonance, vivid characterization, and commenting on geopolitical anxieties were praised.⁶⁶ The areas of criticism include the inconsistency of the pacing, the lack of plausibility, the use of stereotyped characterization, and jingoistic undertones that weaken the exploration of the conflict.⁶⁷

The novel has a strong contribution to Indian speculative fiction, as it stands out as one of the first desi dystopias with strong indigenous mysticism and questioning modern geopolitical reality. Its feminist overtones resonate with the works of Pant, and it promotes the discussion of gender oppression in the crisis situations. Nevertheless, the absence of academic criticism, i.e. other than reviews and bibliographic references, limits academic interest in its geopolitical allegory, postcolonial aspects, and feminist consequences.⁶⁸

8 CONCLUSION

The Man Who Lost India (2024) by Meghna Pant is an in-depth exploration of dystopian themes, geopolitical concerns, and human resilience that provides a speculative insight into the possible outcomes of the conflict between India and China through the story of invasion, eradication of cultures, and supernatural intervention. By studying the microcosmic India of Lalbag, and by exploring the theme of oppression, gender roles, love, mystical survival, the novel explores the traps of nationalism and power imbalance without undermining the

timeless human spirit against the backdrop of societal collapse. The structural and stylistic review points out the elements of cinematic flash and character-driven intensity in spite of the pacing irregularities and plausibility issues, making it a bold, but not flawless, entry into Indian speculative fiction.

Critical reception confirms its topicality in its response to modern fears, and feminist overtones reflecting the previous works of Pant and creating similarities with the rest of the world dystopian tradition. The novel not only breaks down the reasons why people go to war and get colonised but also sheds light on the ways to be resilient, reminding people to reconsider the power of togetherness in the era of division. With a changing geopolitical reality, its cultural relevance persists, and further scholarly discussion is welcome on how speculative narratives can encourage humanity and vision in a globalised world. The future academic practise must cover the gaps in the existing research, deepening the insights into how speculative fiction predicts and criticises the future of society in an interdisciplinary discourse between literature, politics, and cultural studies.

9 IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE SCOPE

The novel is a prospective instrument of diplomatic introspection, creating empathy and consciousness to reduce the tension of occupation by vivid portrayals of the human cost of occupation that is not usually addressed in policy debates.⁶⁹ It develops Indian dystopian fiction by integrating socio-political commentary with the supernatural, broadening the canon to include indigenous mysticism and cultural hybridity, and may encourage ambitious writing in South Asian fiction.⁷⁰

Feminist fronts: The gender dynamics explored by the novel in its forbidden romance and female agency in crisis strengthen the theme of empowerment developed by Pant, illuminating gender studies with the purpose of passion as a means of resistance in dystopian settings.⁷¹ The novel focuses on the themes of love, loss, and human strength against all odds and provides insights into the recovery process after a

conflict and the maintenance of identity in separated communities.⁷²

10 FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

Further research might elaborate further on comparative studies with other Indian dystopias at the time such as *The Sentence* (2025) by Gautam Bhatia, exploring similarities in themes of societal breakdown and rebellion in postcolonial society. The intersectional frameworks may evaluate the way in which the female agency of Pant is reflected in the empowerment issues and extend the feminist arguments of the analysis of her oeuvre. The geopolitical allegory of the novel, when compared to the real-life Himalayan conflicts, could be explored through the prism of international relations, as well as literature as a tool in influencing the attitudes of the population towards diplomacy and nationalism. Its cinematic potential could be explored with adaptation studies, which would deal with the problem of visualising supernatural elements and the erasure of culture across mediums.

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