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Portrayal of Indian History and Politics in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's award winning work The Great Indian Novel showcases an allegorical representation of recent history and politics modelled on the ancient epic Mahabharata. . He has taken the epic as a blueprint and filled it with a contemporary cast for his witty sent-up of pre and post-independence India. The history of India's struggle against colonial rule and her postcolonial tryst with democracy is presented in an epic vein. Tharoor's strategy, bases on both the modern problematization of history and politics; and Indian traditions is both culturally appropriate and subversive in terms of internal affairs as well as imperial history and its modern legacies.

Keywords*— *Epic, Allegory, Historiography, Politics, Satire, Myth, Social Realism, Contemporary Society.

Shashi Tharoor's award winning novel *The Great Indian Novel*, could be summed up as an allegorical remoulding of Indian history and politics. The novel showcases an allegorical representation of recent history modelled on the ancient epic *Mahabharata*. The Mahabharata is a foundational text of Indian literature and an inextricable part of Indian living tradition. Any work of fiction that is modelled on the epic would naturally be assured of a general acceptability and an interest among Indian readers. Besides its mythological background, the epic has a considerable historical core and it embraces virtually all the vital aspects of human experience. This makes the epic an appropriate model for a fictional reconstruction of Indian national history.

The Mahabharata is an imitable text for writing any historical narrative which centres on themes as well as motifs of power, politics, conspiracy, clash of personalities, institutional structures and individual as well as collective dharma. These thematic concerns are also to be found at the centre of Tharoor's reconstruction of modern Indian history. Moreover, Tharoor has dexterously embellished the novel with varied socio-political and cultural concerns.

The Great Indian Novel deals with the issues and views related to Indian history, politics, society, mythology, tradition and culture. It derives its title not from the author's assessment of the book's content but in deference to its primary source of inspiration, the ancient epic *The Mahabharata*. Shashi Tharoor has taken the epic as a blueprint and filled it with a contemporary cast for his witty sent-up of pre and post-independence India. The history of India's struggle against colonial rule and her postcolonial tryst with democracy is presented in an epic vein. Like the epic of Vyasa, the novel is divided into eighteen books and its narrative is presented in a variegated style and digressive manner. The historical narrative follows the line of the Mahabharata providing insight both into current politics and into the epic. Tharoor uses an allegorical mode in which the ancient epic-becomes a structuring device to create a highly individual version of Indian history with the help of varied socio-political and cultural motifs.

The Great Indian Novel attempts to underscore the continuity of the historical processes by using historical concerns in the text. It demonstrates that even though the great epic warriors had died on India's mythological battlefields long ago; epic battles are being fought for great causes like freedom and restoration of democracy in the modern history of the country as well. The national movement for freedom from colonial rule and the people's uprising against Indira Gandhi's dictatorial regime mark the continuation of the epic struggle between *dharma* and *adharma*, fought on the battleground of Kurukshetra. Viewed from this perspective, the recent history of India is a reflection of what happened in the Mahabharata. The simultaneity of the epic and the contemporary history, of tradition and modernity, is further suggested by the fact that instead of using two separate

time frames of the mythic age and the modern, Tharoor inextricably fuses them into one, presenting characters and events from the Mahabharata as contemporaneous with the present age.

The characters of the novel are symbolic and laden with thematic significance. They resemble the epic characters from the past but act in the present. For instance, the character of Ganga Datta—going to meet Satyavati's father in the forest and asking her hand for his own father Shantanu—is described in *The Great Indian Novel* as both *Gangaputra Bhishma* and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

> Ganga Datta didn't travel alone either. In later years he would be accompanied by a non-violent army of *satyagrahis,* so that the third-class train carriages he always insisted on travelling in were filled with the elegantly sacrificing elite of his followers, rather than the sweat-stained poor, but on this occasion it was a band of ministers and courtiers he took with him to see Satyavati's father. Ganga Datta always have a penchant for making his most dramatic gestures before a sizeable audience. Even one day he wills to die in front of a crowd. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 23)

The character of Ganga Datta is presented as Gandhi. With his innumerable fads and his baggage from the hoary antiquity of Hindu. India, serves as the major link between the time past and the time present. It is with Gandhi, who reads the Vedas and Tolstoy, the philosophy of Ruskin and the laws of Manu "with equal involvement," (Tharoor, 25) that the mythical story of the novel takes off.

Gradually the text gets "populated by contemporary characters [who are] transported incongruously though time to their generic mythological settings" (355). These historical characters are laced with social, political and cultural motifs. The first half of the novel establishes an almost point-to-point parallel between Bhishma and Gandhi—the Hastinapur patriarch and the undisputed leader of Indian National Congress—from the declaration of his terrible vow of celibacy to his assassination by Shikhandin presented as Nathuram Godse.

With the expansion of the allegorical scheme, the mythological story encloses other historical characters. Jawaharlal Nehru is represented by Dhritarashtra who "had the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was but as he wanted it to be" (85). Subhas Chandra Bose, the modern Pandu, is presented as a quixotic patriot who lacked pragmatism and judgement. Drona ironically, though not without sympathy, is viewed as a leader who could have changed the course of Indian history, if he had not been betrayed by both his companions and the foreign powers. Mohammed Ali Jinnah is represented by Karna, one of the most interesting, though romanticized characters in the novel. Tharoor describes in detail the circumstances of his birth and the reasons of his alienation from the Congress Party, which made him join the Muslim League and demand for Pakistan, in order to forge links between Karna and his modern counterpart. The analogy appears to be largely convincing as modern Karna portrays the beauty, munificence and pathos of his mythical prototype.

In order to fit the actual historical personalities and events into the frame of epic, Tharoor has made some changes in the cast of the characters. Thus, instead of one hundred sons of Dhritarastra and Gandhari, one finds only Priya Durdyodhani. She represents all the Kauravas with an altered sex. The Pandavas, on the other hand, are presented as an assorted group, and except Yudhistir who stand for Morarji Desai, they are conceived as the incarnations of some major institutions of the country like army, press, bureaucracy and foreign services which are meant to husband and protect democracy represented by Draupadi. Regarding these changes, which are necessitated by the structural design, Tharoor remarks:

> . . . the yoking of myth to history restricted some of my fictional options; as the novel progressed, I was obliged to abandon novelistic conventions and develop characters which are merely walking metaphors. Draupadi, thus, become emblematic of Indian democracy, her attempted disrobing a symbol of what was sought to be done to democracy not so long ago. (*Literary Criterion* 6)

The parentage of the five Pandavas in Tharoor's novel also does not quite conform to the original. Since Nehru and Indira dominate the political stage in post-independence India, the Pandavas are kept away from the centre of power. They spend most of their time in the countryside with their teacher and political mentor, the bearded socialist Jayaprakash Drona who represents the renowned socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan. Krishna, the supreme creation of Vyasa in the Mahabharata, appears to be a sadly diminished figure in Tharoor's narrative. The epic protagonist is assigned no special role in the novel. He is represented as a small-town M.L.A and Congress Party secretary, who remains aloof from national politics but gives a short spiritual discourse to vacillating Arjun before the election of 1977.

Despite many changes and deviations from the original in order to accommodate the principal events and characters of the twentieth century India to the plot-outline of the Mahabharata, Tharoor has remarkably succeeded in forging smooth and credible connections between the historical and the mythological motifs. The efficiency with which the historic freedom movement and the subsequent conflict among Indian leaders over the issue of sharing power are superimposed on the politico-religious struggle of participation is remarkable. The responsibility of the reader of *The Great Indian Novel* is to figure out the parallels between the historical and the mythical stories and to grasp their implications in order to get essence of Tharoor's version of the country's past.

The Great Indian Novel is Mahabharata re-written, in which the novelist uses mythical motifs elaborately to function as the prototype. The ancient epic of Vyasa provides for Tharoor's novel not only the thematic aesthetics but also a pattern of life as well as a value system to refer to. Tharoor discovers a meaningful correspondence between the new myth of India's freedom struggle and the fight for democracy, and the epic battle to uphold truth and *dharma* which took place in the country's fabulous antiquity. The account of recent Indian history in his novel revives the memory of the mythic age and evokes the feeling that contemporary Indian reality can be comprehended in the critical light of the country's mythical past. It suggests that ancient Hastinapur also contained, like present-day India, 'midnight's parents' (*Midnight's Children* 87) such as Dhritarastra, Karna, Vidur, and Pandu; villainous advisers like Shakuni; self-seeking and arrogant politicians like Priya Duryodhani, whose inordinate greed for power brought about untold misery and suffering to the people.

The novel makes a creative use of the narrative structure to interpret contemporary history and critically evaluate the role of political personalities of twentieth century India. Tharoor uses the mythic setting as a parallel to the modern age. The remote past and the recent present reflect each other, as in a mirror, and this inter-reflection modifies the reader's usual perception of both the epic and the recent history. The entire narrative of the novel is laden with socio, political and cultural motifs.

Again, in order to dovetail some important episodes from the epic with the framework of the historical narrative, the novelist shifts them into a dream world. Even social, political and cultural events serves as motifs in a work of literature. These include the murder of Gandhi, the disrobing of D. Mokrasi during Indira Gandhi's tyrannical rule, and the journey of Yudhistir to heaven. Tharoor also integrates some key episodes from the Mahabharata into the novel in order to project certain important political events of Post-Independence India allegorically. The defeat of Hidimba by Bhima is presented as a parallel to the liberation of Goa by Indian army from Portuguese occupation; the tearing off the body of Jarasandha into two halves by the second Pandava mirrors the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The humiliating defeat of Sahadeva in the wrestling match with Bakasura during the period of exile reflects India's military debacle during the Indo-China war in 1962. *The Great Indian Novel* is, in fact, Tharoor's version of the present-day *Mahabharata,* and as such it is laden with contemporary socio-political and historical incidents.

The novel evinces historical as well as political references of the past and the present. Tharoor reveals Gandhi's undisguised preference for Nehru which helped the latter to gain importance in the Congress Party and become the Prime Minister of the country after Independence. It records his role in the resignation of Subhas Chandra Bose from the Congress presidency and his expulsion from the party. Mohammed Ali Jinnah—represented as Karna— was another serious contender for power. He had all the qualities as well as the charisma to lead the Congress Party. But the circumstances of his birth and his monumental ego, which would not allow him to accept any subordinate role under Gandhi and Nehru, led him to leave the party and espouse the cause of the Muslim League. In Post-Independence India Nehru was succeeded first by Lal Badadur Shashri, who was a good Prime Minister in a decent and well-meaning way, and then by Indira Gandhi. Indira was chosen as Prime Minister because the old guards of the Congress Party thought that she would remain under their control. But belying all expectations, she soon turned into Frankenstein's monster who threatened the democratic institutions of the country. She tried her best to keep the Pandavas away from power and even to eliminate them.

The novel also figures out many events laden with political relevance. For the greater part of the narrative, the Pandavas had stayed away from the corridors of power. They spend their time with their teacher and mentor Jayaprakash Narayan (Drona) in the countryside raising the people's political consciousness, clamouring for land reform and fighting against exploitation and corruption. The marriage of Arjun with *D*(raupadi)*Mokrasi*— who had a mixed parentage, being the product of Nehru's illicit liaison with Edwina Mountbatten—allegorically represents the union of Indian democracy with the voice of the people. The Pandavas, however, took an active part in the people's uprising against Indira's misrule, which was led by Jayaprakash

Narayan. After her electoral defeat, Yudhishtir (Morarji) became the country's Prime Minister.

The historical account of India which Tharoor present in *The Great Indian Novel* covers a much longer time-period—from the nationalist movement to the assassination of Indira Gandhi in 1984. A host of important historical figures from the pre and post-independence eras—Gandhi, Nehru, Jinnah, Patel, Indira Gandhi, Krishna Menon, Ram Manek Shaw, Arun Shourie—as well as major historical events such as the Salt March, Jallianwallah Bagh, Assassination of Gandhi, Emergency, General Elections of 1982, appear in the motif structure. Tharoor's 'fictional recasting' of the epic sets up a perspective which connects not only its narrative but also the underlying notions of history, fiction, and society, with ancient and resilient Indian traditions (even a tongue-in-cheek claim to an Indian autobiographical tradition, laid down by a succession of eminent baldheads from Rajaji to Chagla). It is thought such a return to indigenous traditions that the novel poses a significant challenge to the dominant Western paradigms of fiction and historiography. Its thematic pattern allows Tharoor to suggest, in indigenous cultural traditions and myths, an alternative to the Western paradigm. The purity of form of the traditional novel is discarded by a large admixture of verse in what Tharoor calls a "conscious (if tougue-in-cheek) bow to the fact that many prose translators of the Mahabharata, attempting to convey the poetic quality of the world's longest epic poem, have done the same"("Rev. of *The Great Indian Novel,"* shashitharoor.com).

The overt self-consciousness about language, truth, and motif patterns (symbols) in *The Great Indian Novel* signals a radical subversion of the European record of history and Indian culture. At the same time, the notion of fiction in historiography and the partial nature of any account of history are highlighted and overtly problematized. As P.K Rajan raises the question:

> . . . is it permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun?. . . At what point in the recollection of truth does wisdom cease to transcend knowledge? How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy? (*News uest* 8)

The parallelism of the ancient epic with the story of modern India provides Tharoor with an appropriately vast framework of motifs for representing the variegated and complex cultural and political environment of Indian society. The re-vitalisation and re-telling of the epic becomes a strategy for the retrospective interrogation of the recent past which marks many texts of the 80s. The acerbic wit and satire of the novel is not reserved for the British alone but is aimed equally at those who allowed Gandhi's ideals to be forgotten or trivialized, at the degeneration into autocracy of the freedom won by sacrifice and idealism, at some of the traditions of ancient India as well as the ethics of the modern society. What the novel offers is not a comforting return to an idealised past but a glimpse of the complexity of modern India where the past and the present coexist a careful examination of the cultural and historical legacy. As Dharma tells Yudhistir on the mountain top:

> . . . no more certitude . . . . Accept doubt and diversity . . . . Derive your standards form the world around you and not form a heritage whose relevance must be constantly tested. Reject equally the sterility of ideologies and the passionate prescriptions of those who think themselves infallible. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 101)

Tharoor's picture of India in his novel is one of an India of multiple realities and of multiple interpretations of reality; and the Indian sensibility emerges as a cosmopolitan one shaped by a variety of sources and influences, indigenous and international.In comparison with a novel like *A Sutaible Boy,* where the notions of society and history are not problematized and which is written in the mode of transparent social realism, *The Great Indian Novel* is more adequately able to present a history of India by recognizing the inevitable partialness and incompleteness. Tharoor's strategy, bases on both the modern problematization of history and society; and Indian traditions is both culturally appropriate and subversive in terms of internal affairs as well as imperial history and its modern legacies. As Vyas puts it:

> History is evolving . . . the world, the universe, all human life, and so, too, every institution under which we live is in a constant state of evolution. The world and everything in it is being created and re-created . . . each hour, each day, each week, going through the unending process of birth and rebirth which has made us all. India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again. India is forever; and India is forever being made. (Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 25)

The complete, final and true history of India, can consequently, never be written. And this is an

impossibility that historiography—including society and culture—must recognize and handle.The political history of modern India as Tharoor demonstrates, resembles closely the events and characters of the great epic:

> The nightmarish experience of the country during the darkest period in the history of free India helped in reviving the memory of the battle of the Kurukshetra, giving rise to the realization that contemporary Indian reality can be understood in the relation to the myths and legends of India's remote past. (Chaudhary 104)

The Mahabharata can be called a warrior-epic because of the several wars that had taken place both in the minds of the protagonists and on the battlefield. It consists of 1,00,000 couplets, longer than even *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The incidents are very intricate and are all inseparably bound to the main plot of the story. On account of its vast store of vocabulary, its plots and sub plots, its implications and its morals, symbols and motifs; the Mahabharata has provided sufficient material for writing new literature and has inspired poets like Bhasa, Kalidas and Bharavi.

> The Mahabharata is the unitary national myth that perceives itself as totality and provides for Tharoor's novel the most appropriate allegorical background to project modern Indian situation. Tharoor uses the mythical setting of the ancient epic to foreground the eternal present, the continuance of the historical process from India's remote past to the present.(Chaudhary 102)

Thus, the matrix of history is already available for Tharoor; he only has to write another novel by recasting the events of this century on the canvas of the past. He had to give fictive names to persons, places and events, and create some characters as metaphors or personifications of certain incidents. Such characters and incidents have been made to carry certain symbolic significance and most importantly are a part of recurrent motif pattern.

Tharoor uses the allegorical background and the epic age, more as a parallel to modern times than as a contrast as it is borne out by his application of the key events and characters of the Mahabharata**,** particularly the disrobing of Draupadi. In the final book of the novel, *The Path to Salvation*, the concluding event of the epic, Pandava's journey to heaven, is reproduced almost as it is except the final comment of Yudhisthir. Tharoor uses parallelism as a defamiliarizing technique for the purpose of modifying the usual perception of the political personalities and issues not only of the modern India but also those of the epic age. "The purpose of parallelism," according to Victor Shklovsky, "like the general purpose of imagery, is to transfer the usual perception of an object into the sphere of new perception—that is, to make a unique semantic modification"(Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* 56).

But in this novel, instead of one, two objects are involved, the remote past and the present, the one mirroring the other and through their inter-reflection modifying the usual perception of both. By using parallelism as an irradiating medium, the novel tries to underline the true history of Kurukshetra.

The motif of history and politics surfaces in the novel repeatedly. It seems as if history is blind like Dhritarastra and therefore it repeats its mistakes. At the end of the novel, Yudhisthir

tries to find liberation from the bondage of history. According to him, it is the labyrinth created by the conflicting interpretations of *dharma* in this country that has made the life of the nation a perpetual Kurukshetra. It was the source of conflict and devastation in the past as it is in the present. By accepting 'diversity' alone, he suggests, India in future can escape from the mistakes of the past. To Yama he says: "Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one *dharma*" (418). In Yudhisthir's suggestion one can easily read a political message, that of national intergration or of unity in diversity. Coming at the end of the story, this suggestion upsets Ved Vyasa because *The Great Indian Novel* is about Kurukshetra and not about peaceful coexistence. So he painfully admits to Ganapathi:

> . . . But my last dream, Ganapathi, leaves me with a far more severe problem. If it means anything, anything at all, it means that I have told my story so far from a completely mistaken perspective. I have thought about it, Ganapathi, and I realise I have no choice. I must retell it. (*The Great Indian Novel* 409)

Thematically, Tharoor's novel deals with divisions and conflicts that constitute the history of India from its remote past to the present. To project the pastness of the present and *vice versa*, the novelist has skilfully used a number of experimental techniques including cinematic devices. In generic terms, however, the novel apparently seems to make an attempt to work out Yudhisthir's suggestion regarding diversity. The novel, being the most inclusive form, can accommodate conflicting genres and varied perspectives. Tharoor uses a form that like a 'capacious hold-all' includes poetry and

prose, realism and fantasy, hagiography and history, sociological lectures and scenic rendering of events. But he fails to evolve varying tones and perspectives through the use of different genres.

The novel seeks not only to supplant the history of India with a counter discourse but also to undermine and subvert the hagiographic account of some leaders like Nehru, Indira, and Jayaprakash in post-independence India. He stresses the subjective nature of his 'memoir' or 'memory's truth' which has been prompted by a need to correct the notion held abroad that India is an 'underdeveloped country' and to show that she is, in fact, 'a highly developed [country] in an advanced state of decay'. That is why he wants his account, which is full of irreverent playfulness, to be taken as seriously as *The Mahabharata* itself:

> . . . .We're not writing a piddling western thriller here. This is my story, the story of Ved Vyas, eighty-eight years only and full of irrelevancies, but it cound become nothing less than *The Great Indian Novel.* (Tharoor 23)

Shashi Tharoor has declared his intention to speak for an India of multiple realities and multiple interpretation of reality. Throughout the novel runs an acknowledgement of the multiplicity of truth that has given shape and substance to the idea of (Great) India. He takes his vocation as a writer very seriously. Writing is a process of self-discovery for him. He admits that he has a number of responsibilities which he seeks to express through his writings,

> . . . . I explore things that matter to me, like our Indian heritage, the forces that are making and unmaking India and also the dilemmas, problems and situations we are dealing with in our society and civilization" (Bhargawa 12).

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