



Mythology, History And Political Ideology In Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel

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Abstract: This research paper offers a postmodernist reading of *The Great Indian Novel* that absorbs the spirit of the great Indian epic composed by Ved Vyasa. The Mahabharata is not just an account of heroism or a tale of the conflict between good and evil told in the form of an epic; it is the story of Bharatavarsha. The epic provides a glimpse into the cultural richness of Indian civilisation as well as presents a highly developed society before modern readers. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* re-reads the myth of the Mahabharata and reinterprets it to suit the modern social ideology of the modern readers. The author brings historical episodes in the text which makes the novel a historiographic metafiction. The Mahabharata is studied by Tharoor within the framework of Indian colonial and postcolonial history. He appropriates characters from the epic and presents them as historical figures who influenced India's contemporary history. The novel is read by the researcher as a satire of history and the epic. The author presents mythological characters in a more realistic manner, distorting their traditional image. By reinterpreting the epic and history through Shashi Tharoor's spectacles, this research study aims to reconcile myth and reality. To examine the novel's intertextuality, parody, pastiche, and metafiction, the researcher chooses a postmodernist method.

Key Words: Bharatavarsha, glimpse, myth, contemporary, metafiction, postmodernist.

I. INTRODUCTION:

Shashi Tharoor wrote a satirical book titled *The Great Indian Novel*, which was initially released by Viking Press in 1989. It is a work of fiction that retells the epic Mahabharata tale within the framework of the Indian independence movement and the first thirty years after independence. Characters from mythology are

created from historical figures in India, and the mythological history of the country is rewritten as the history of Indian independence and the years that followed, up until the 1970s. There is a subversive element in the novel, according to certain commentators.[1] Many puns and references to well-known works on India, including those by Rudyard Kipling, Paul Scott, and E. M. Forster, may be found throughout the text.

MYTHOLOGY, HISTORY AND POLITICAL IDEOLOGY IN SHASHI THAROOR'S NOVEL: The epic poem Mahabharata recounts the historical dynastic conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two lineages descended from King Shantanu, over the kingdom of Hastinapur's throne. In his book, Tharoor rewrites the history of the developing Indian democracy to focus on conflicts between people and groups who are connected by shared political and personal experiences. Tharoor treats historical leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Mohandas Gandhi, who are typically revered by Indians, with disdain through his irascible narrator.

The term "great Indian novel" is a pun that loosely translates to "Mahabharata" (Maha meaning "great" and Bharata meaning "India"). It also refers to the long-standing concept of the "Great American Novel." According to Tharoor, the Mahabharata—which is an epic poem rather than a novel can be seen as Hinduism's greatest literary work and, as such, provides a suitable framework for narrating contemporary Indian history.

The focus Tharoor places on the elder generations—Bhishma, Dhritrashtra, and Pandu, for example—and the consequent de-emphasis on the deeds of the Pandavas and Kauravas are noteworthy aspects of his retelling of the story. The novel's sections and chapters are structured similarly to the Mahabharata, and each chapter's themes and events refer to those found in the



corresponding sections of the epic. The story is divided into 18 "books," just like the Mahabharata is divided into 18 volumes and the Battle of Kurukshetra was fought over 18 days.

The Mahabharata tells the tale of a family feud between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, two groups of cousins who fight each other for control of the Hastinapur throne. The triumph of dharma over adharma is the poem's main topic. Although the poem appears to tell the tale of a family conflict, it actually offers a universal message. It is a story about a power struggle that occurs in all civilizations and cultures. As a result, the Mahabharata is a story about humanity rather than a family, area, society, or civilization.

Dharma is closely related to mythology. It is also a strong foundation of any great culture, feeding and maintaining the core ideals for the coming generation. It's a cultural belief system that dates back thousands of years. Myths are disseminated by literature and religion in each given social structure. Mythology actually has similarities with religion, anthropology, and cultural history. It also tends to be speculative and philosophical. History, on the other hand, is a chronicle of real people and events that happened in the past.

The Mahabharata is reinterpreted in The Great Indian Novel within the framework of colonial and postcolonial history. Tharoor fictionalizes history and historicizes mythology in the book. He selects legendary figures from the epic and presents them as real-life historical figures who were instrumental in the Indian Freedom Movement and the early years following independence. Readers are aware of two facts while reading the novel: factual facts found in historical accounts and mythological facts found in the epic; as a result, the work's fiction is highlighted. Tharoor depicts fictionalized people and events using passages from the epic and history.

The book is classified as a postmodern Indian English novel that tells the story of the political unrest in India through mythology. In order to retell the history of the Mahabharata, Tharoor suggests using postmodernist narrative, which involves recasting and re-inventing the characters, events, and episodes. The book can be read because the characters are actual historical individuals from twentieth-century Indian politics, the story might be viewed as a political allegory. The author offers a commentary on India's colonial and postcolonial histories through the symbolic juxtaposition of mythology and political history. Because both mythology and history are playfully

presented as sincere, the novel is a satire of both. Postmodern approaches, such as pastiche, parody, intertextuality, playful tone, temporal distortion, historical metafiction, etc., have been employed by the author. The novel's narrative style dissects the archetypal mythological characters ingrained in the Indian people's collective unconscious.

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.

The narrative is populated by contemporary characters [who are] transported incongruously though time to their generic mythological settings, gradually from this point on. There are social, political, and cultural undertones throughout these historical figures. Between Bhishma and Gandhi—the patriarch of Hastinapur and the unchallenged leader of the Indian National Congress—the first part of the narrative draws virtually exact parallels, from his pronouncement of his awful vow of celibacy to his assassination by Shikhandin, who is portrayed as Nathuram Godse. Other historical figures are included in the mythological plot as a result of the allegorical scheme's growth. Dhritarashtra, who had the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was but as he wanted it to be is Jawaharlal Nehru's representative. The modern Pandu, Subhas Chandra Bose, is portrayed as a romanticized patriot devoid of common sense and practicality. Ironically, though not without compassion, Drona is seen as a leader who, had he not been deceived by both his allies and the foreign powers, may have altered the route of Indian history. A fascinating, albeit glorified, character in the book, Karna stands in for Mohammed Ali Jinnah. To create a bridge between Karna and his contemporary, Tharoor goes into great depth about his birth and the reasons behind his distancing from the Congress Party, which led him to join the Muslim League and advocate for Pakistan. Given that contemporary Karna embodies the grace, altruism, and sorrow of his legendary forerunner, the comparison seems to be rather persuasive.

Tharoor has altered the cast of characters in order to incorporate the real historical figures and events into the epic. Consequently, one finds only Priya Durdyodhani rather than the hundred sons of Dhritarastra and Gandhari. She represents



all the Kauravas with an altered sex. On the other hand, the Pandavas are portrayed as a diverse group, and with the exception of Yudhistir, who stands in for Morarji Desai, they are thought to be the incarnations of some significant national institutions like the army, press, bureaucracy, and foreign services, all of which are intended to uphold and defend the democracy that Draupadi represents. These are some modifications, which the structural design requires.

In Tharoor's novel, the ancestry of the five Pandavas also deviates slightly from the original. The Pandavas are kept out of the center of power in post-independence India because Nehru and Indira dominate the political scene. With their political guru and teacher, the bearded socialist Jayaprakash Drona, who stands in for the well-known socialist leader Jayaprakash Narayan, they spend most of their time in the countryside. Additionally, Tharoor incorporates several pivotal Mahabharata tales into the book to allegorically portray a number of significant political developments in India after independence. The defeat of Hidimba by Bhima is compared to the Indian army's liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule; Bhima's mutilation of Jarasandha's body into two parts is compared to the division of Pakistan and the establishment of Bangladesh. Sahadeva's crushing loss to Bakasura in their wrestling battle during their exile is a reflection of India's military failure in the 1962 Indo-China War.

In Tharoor's story, Krishna—the greatest invention of Vyasa in the Mahabharata—seems to be a much weakened character. In the book, the heroic protagonist isn't given any particular responsibility. He is portrayed as a small-town M.L.A. and Congress Party secretary who stays out of national politics but gives Arjun, who is on the fence, a brief spiritual speech prior to the 1977 election.

Tharoor shifts his focus from the fight against British rule to the fight against the Indian government following independence. After splitting from the Congress Party's Kaurva party, Jaiprakash Drona organized protests in the public eye against Priya Duryodhani and Dhritarashtra. "Drona converted to the Mahaguru's nonviolent doctrine after independence." In public, Jaiprakash Drona complains that while factories and machinery are being established, the welfare of the peasantry is neglected. The ministers of the new India visit chemical and steel plants to open them, but the Kauravas party is not fulfilling its pre-independence commitments. The sincere peasant

deserves to be compensated for his labor of love! Reach the tiller with land.

After Dhritarashtra, Yudhisthir, Bheem, Arjun, Nakul, and Sahadev—representatives of Truth, Army, Law, Bureaucracy, and Foreign Services, respectively—may be threatened by Priya Duryodhani, according to Tharoor. The biggest danger to Dharma in the Mahabharata was Duryodhan. As is well known from the epic, Duryodhan attempts to burn the Pandavas during the Lakshyagrah alongside mother Kunti and Dropadi. In a similar vein, Tharoor portrays Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) as trying to assassinate, or rather, euphuistically, to take over the army, bureaucracy, democracy, truth, and Indian foreign services during the Emergency period. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor says: "India could not be India without loud, vibrant, excited and contending opinions that it's free press expresses." (391)

Nakul and Sahadev are portrayed in the novel's mythological motifs as the two main pillars of Indian democracy. The diplomatic and administrative services serve as a symbol for them. The truth that functions in public domain is called yudhister. The force that defends democracy's borders is Bheem. The author of the story justifies Dropadi's (Democracy of India) morally and ethically wrong marriage to five men in the epic. Truth, Army, Law, Bureaucracy, and Foreign Services must all work together to safeguard democracy. The novel's seamless integration of myth and history exposes and censures Jawaharlal Nehru's Dhritrastra for neglecting the Indian Army following independence. At the end of the novel the democracy is restored as Priya Duryodhani revokes the Emergency rule and declares elections. With the release of all opposition leaders, a cool breeze of Democracy begins to blow.

II. CONCLUSION:

Indian politics and history are mythologized in a distinctive fashion by Shashi Tharoor. Tharoor creates fiction as if it were an epic by utilizing legendary techniques. The average reader may quickly and accurately draw parallels between every event in *The Great Indian Novel* and the real-life events that took place during the Indian national war for independence. Throughout the book, Tharoor's characters recite mythological poetry in the native tongue. Only those who are familiar with the true story can identify the persons or the situations. The novel attempts to attack and subvert the hagiographic narrative of prominent figures in post-independence India, in addition to



replacing the history of India with a counter discourse. In order to refute the misconception that India is a "underdeveloped country" and to demonstrate that she is, in fact, "a highly developed [country] in an advanced state of decay," he emphasizes the subjective nature of his "memoir" or "memory's truth." He therefore desires that his account—which brims with irreverent playfulness—be regarded with the same gravity as The Mahabharata. 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,

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