



TRUTH BEHIND THE MYTH IN SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL*

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's is one of the leading literary figures in Indian writing in English. He is known for his creativity and artistic sense especially the portrayal of Indian culture and tradition. His ideas are based on the myths such as Vedas, Puranas and classical perspective. He has produced numerous literary works and acclaimed the best of honours from reputed literary publication. The present paper brings out the nature of Indian myth which gives a sparkle to Indian English literature. The Great Indian Novel is the masterpiece of tharoor. In this novel he talks about the political issues in India.

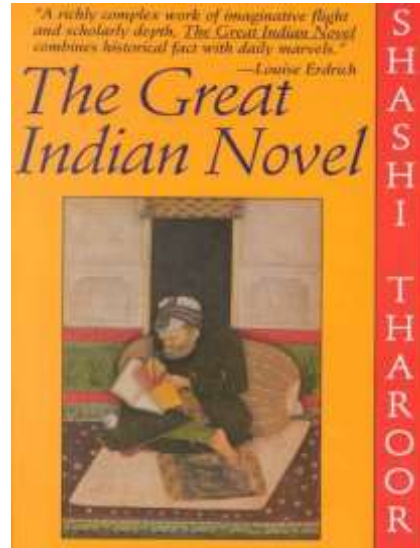
KEY WORDS: Myth, Epic, Inter-textuality, Socio–Political consciousness, anti-colonial struggle.

Introduction

Mahabharata, one of the two greatest Indian Epics of the second century BC, stands a perfect testimony of the rich literature of the Indian legacy. The phenomenal Epic is a narration by the Great Sanskrit Pandit Veda Vyas to the elephant headed Lord Ganesha, who penned it down into a manuscript. The Epic holds an immortal character Lord Krishna [Incarnation of Lord Vishnu], who is born as a mortal human being in the world, to impart law and justice in the society and also to implement faith on the fact that "truth alone triumphs". The Epic has had also tried to instill sense and morality among the people and it was an eye opener that even the Lord Himself was no exception at the hands of fate. *Mahabharata* portrayed numerous characters, who were distinct and vivid in their own way and represented the everyday realities of life, as



early as then. It was to show people that our own actions and reactions would determine the consequences of life.



Since its creation, several attempts were made to revamp the story in many different forms. Every attempt was a success in its own way, and one such attempt by Shashi Tharoor, in the novel *The Great Indian Novel*, had not only the story of the Great Epic transformed, but also contained a parallel narration of the Indian Independence Movement and post-Independence politics. One may wonder, why an author would choose to mix two complete different stories and juxtapose into one. Tharoor gives his book only as the answer. He has elegantly combined two different plots, without having spoiled the other one. The main idea behind such an analogical narration was to tell a story which was widely read but hardly felt, with an epic base attached to it. His novel reveals some of the shocking factors of the Independence movement and throws light on the important yet unrecognized events of the movement. The rest of the paper presentation is to affirm his “facts behind the myth” in *The Great Indian Novel*.





The novel is divided into eighteen books which are skilfully planned as parallels to the cantos of Vyasa's Epic. The books are given titles which parody well known literary works on India by British and Indian authors and displays the inter-textuality of the novel. There are chapters entitled '*The Duel with the Crown*', '*A Raj Quartet*' and '*The Powers of Silence*' which recall the Raj fiction of Paul Scott. The chapter named 'Passages through India' is a fitting reply to E.M.Forster's famous novel *A Passage to India*. While 'The Bungle Book' narrates the dictorial rule of Indira Gandhi, reminds one of Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, 'The Far Power Villian' is reminiscent of M.M.Kaye's *The Far Pavilions*. The author's debt to Salman Rushdie is duly acknowledged in entitling a chapter 'Midnight's Parents'.

Through a creative use of mythic setting, Tharoor builds up an order where the ancient and the modern, the past and the present are inextricably entwined. Instead of using two separate time-frames- one for the epic age and other for the modern- he fuses them into one, presenting events, episodes and characters from the *Mahabharata* as contemporaneous with the present. One thus finds a simultaneous description of the ancient and the modern reality, each mirroring the other and modifying the reader's perception of the both. Tharoor uses the allegorical mode in which the story of the epic becomes a structuring device to create an individual and highly subjective/subversive version of India's past and offers an incisive commentary on the political events and personalities of the twentieth century India.

In conformity with the narrative design of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor begins his account with the birth of the narrator, Ved Vyas ('The Twice-Born Tale') and ends with the Pandavas' journey to heaven ('The Path to Salvation'). In between, he narrates, following epic pattern, the story of India's glorious anti-colonial struggle and her disappointing postcolonial destiny.

A diplomat and writer, Shashi Tharoor, was born in 1956 in London and educated in Bombay, Calcutta, and Delhi and in the United States. He completed his Ph.D. from Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University (USA) at the age of 22. Since May 1978, Tharoor has worked for the United Nations. In 1997, Tharoor was appointed as the Executive Assistant to the then Secretary General of the United Nations, Kofi Annan, and in 2006 he was declared India's candidate for the top post of this international organization. His other fictional works include *The Five Dollar Smile*, *Show Business*, *Riot*.

"History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between *dharma* and *adharma* is a struggle of our nation, and each one of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence" (391)

The novel as said earlier, is a reinterpretation of India's history, with *Mahabharata* as the blueprint, on the lines of political satire. The book begins on the clichéd statement of India being





an underdeveloped country and the narrator Ved Vyas trying to defend this argument in the rest of the book. The historical narrative in *The Great Indian Novel* begins with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the undisputed leader of Indian struggle for freedom from British rule and ends with the return of Indira Gandhi to power after the premature downfall of the Janata Front government. It covers a period of nearly seventy five years and all the major political events that took place in pre Independent India; the Champaran Satyagraha, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Round Table Conference, Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, the Quit India Movement, the Partition and its aftermaths, conflicts with Pakistan and China, the Bangladesh war and the Emergency. Gandhiji is represented through Bhishma who is called Ganga Dutta to make him appear contemporaneous with our time. Like his mythical archetype, he renounced his claim for power and reared his two young disciples, Dhritarashtra and Pandu (Jawaharlal Nehru and Subash Chandra Bose) as his successors.

The novel evinces 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 Subash Chandra Bose from the Congress presidency and his expulsion from the party. Mohammad Ali Jinnah- depicted as Karna- was another serious contender for power. He had all the qualities and as well as charisma to lead the Party. But the circumstances of his birth and his monumental ego would not allow him to accept any subordinate role under Gandhi and Nehru led him to leave the Party once, and espouse the cause of the Muslim League. Nehru was immediately succeeded by Lal Bahadur Shastri, who was 'a good Prime Minister in his decent and well-meaning way' (317), and later by Indira Gandhi. She was given support from the Party, because of the fact that the old guards of the party assumed she would remain as a puppet at their hands. But what turned out was an unbelievable shock to them as well as for the country, as she happened to be a Frankenstein's monster who posed a threat to the democratic institutions of the country. She tried her best to keep the Pandavas away from power and even to eliminate them.

From the greater narrative, the Pandavas stay away from the corridors of power. They spend their time with their teacher and mentor Jayaprakash Drona (Narayan) 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) Mokarasi [Democracy]-who has a mixed parentage- is an offspring of Nehru's illicit relationship with Gerorgina Drewpad (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 Drona. After her electoral defeat, Yudhishtir (Morarji) became the country's Prime Minister.





The period of British rule was, thus, for Tharoor, a fitting target for hilarious lampoons and impassioned frontal attacks. The excesses of the British Raj are brilliantly mocked at. Side by side, the novel also depicts the country's struggle against colonial rule under the dynamic rule of Mahatma Gandhi which heralded 'the dawn of a new epoch';

“Students left their classes in the city colleges to flock Gangaji's side; small town lawyers abandoned the security of their regular fees at the assizes to volunteer for the cause; journalists left the empty debating halls of the nominated council chambers to discover the real heart of politics. A nation was rising, with a small, balding, semi-clad saint as its head.”(52)

An epic is a work that deals with lofty themes like war, adventure, travel, etc. The prevailing socio-political and economic situations gave the author the impetus to write an epic on the lines of the Mahabharata. Tharoor, has undoubtedly, done justice to both the tales- of having reinstated India's legacy thereby by filling it with one of the greatest historical events occurred in the country. Thus in author's words 'India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay' (17).

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