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Reimagining History: Shashi Tharoor's Narrative Strategy in *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract

Aims: *The study analyzes Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel (1989) as a postmodern reinterpretation of Indian political history through the mythic framework of the Mahabharata. It demonstrates how Tharoor blends mythology with modern politics to create a satirical and allegorical narrative that reimagines the nation's twentieth-century journey.*

Methodology and Approaches: *The analysis is based on a close reading of the novel with attention to its use of postmodernist techniques such as intertextuality, magic realism, parody, and metafiction. The narrative device of Ved Vyas dictating to Ganapathi is examined as a structural parallel to the Mahabharata. Symbolic episodes and character correspondences are studied to highlight how mythological frameworks are mapped onto contemporary historical figures and events, including the freedom struggle, Partition, and the Emergency.*

Outcome: *The study finds that The Great Indian Novel serves as a historiographic metafiction, challenging the idea of a single, authoritative historical truth. Tharoor's playful yet critical approach reconstructs Indian history by weaving together multiple perspectives, humor, and satire. His narrative technique not only reinterprets past events but also underscores the continuous interplay between myth and modernity in Indian cultural consciousness.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The novel exemplifies how myth can be recontextualized to question, critique, and reinterpret history in a postmodern framework. By reimagining India's past through satire and allegory, Tharoor makes history accessible, engaging, and thought-provoking. The study suggests further exploration of how contemporary Indian writers employ myth to address political and cultural complexities, thereby keeping ancient epics relevant in modern discourse.*

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Indian English literature has gained its place in the global literary landscape, especially since 1980. R.S. Pathak notes, "In the growth and development of the Indian novel in English the 1980s occupy the most significant position.... It is during the eighties that Indian English novelists and novels earned unheard of honours and distinctions in the Western academic world" (14). It has expanded its approach from the imitative, realistic, psychological, philosophical, and conventional phases to the realm of experimentation. Meenakshi Mukherjee identifies three distinct phases in the development of Indian English novels since the 1930s. These include the initial era of historical novels from the 1920s to the 1930s, followed by the socio-political novel during the 1930s and 1940s, and subsequently the phase centered on self-identity narratives, which encompassed psychological novels, from the 1950s to the 1960s. The advent of postmodern novels, marked by the publication of Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* in 1981, can be considered the fourth stage in the evolution of Indian English fiction.

Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* brought a fresh direction and vitality to Indian English fiction, earning him accolades such as the Booker Prize and James Black Memorial Prize in 1981, as well as the prestigious Booker of Bookers in 1993, recognized as the best among Booker Prize winners over a quarter-century since the inception of this esteemed literary award. This novel significantly challenged the conventional and monotonous approaches to writing. Discussing the impact of *Midnight's Children* on Indian English fiction, Viney Kirpal highlights its transformative influence when he states that "Salman Rushdie lay in the new voice and narrative technique he had brought to the old themes of history, politics, gender and self-identity all of which he had pulled together into one novel" (1). Salman Rushdie's remarkable global literary triumph has opened doors for many talented Indian writers to emulate their mentor and gain recognition as "Rushdie's Children," a term coined by the New York Times. With the guidance of these second-generation writers, Indian English fiction has embarked on an innovative path, marked by novel experimentation.

Unexpectedly, the contemporary Indian fiction authors of the second generation have a strong preoccupation with the recent history of India, and their work unmistakably reflects a quest to connect with their ancestral heritage. As Madhusudhan Rao astutely observes: "History is a matter of the soul's search for

finding one's roots in its essential human significance. In such an imaginative capturing of its essence, history is richly humanized" (155). Saleem Sinai, who serves as the storyteller in *Midnight's Children*, experiences that "he had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country" (Rushdie 9). The literature from this era strives to depict India's recent history as a whole, with a specific focus on pivotal events like the Freedom Struggle, the traumatic aftermath of Partition, the political landscape of post-Independence, and the period of Emergency. While the exploration of history is not a novel concept in the realm of Indian English fiction, what distinguishes these writers from their predecessors is their maturity in choosing and handling themes, their manipulation of perspective, their adoption of innovative narrative techniques, including magic realism, and their linguistic creativity involving elements such as hybridization, the infusion of local flavours into language, and intertextuality. Belliappa expresses the viewpoint that "History and Magic Realism seem to have become the major concerns of many Indian English novelists due to the phenomenal influence of Midnight's Children" (7).

Speaking about the significant shift in the method of crafting fiction during the postmodern era, Balaswamy comments: "Among the process of disintegration, dissolution and explosions in this genre, one perceptible development over the recent decades has been the gradual demise of literary realism and the conscious use of the non-realistic modes such as allegory, myth, archetype, etc. Referred to, for the sake of convenience, as the mode of fabulation, it has given rise to the writing of, what is paradoxically called, Fables of Fact" (228). The current study aims to investigate the portrayal of contemporary Indian history in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. He approaches history by utilizing a mythic structure.

The Great Indian Novel, which embodies a postmodernist and deconstructive sensibility, assumes a multidimensional form, incorporating elements like magic realism, intertextuality, metafictionality, and the incorporation of deconstructive elements and practices. Tharoor employed this approach to seamlessly blend myths, fairy tales, legends, and contemporary realities into a cohesive whole. The Mahabharata serves as a fitting allegorical backdrop for him to reinterpret the political history of modern India. His

caricatures of characters seamlessly fit into the mythic framework, allowing him to skillfully interlace the freedom struggle and the political history of post-Independence India with events and figures from the Mahabharata. In essence, he superimposes modern politics onto the pre-existing structure of this myth. As M.L. Pandit puts it, "Tharoor wittily superimposes the structure of the Mahabharata on the history of the Indian freedom struggle and thereafter, hence, distorting the original text" (62). Through its intricate structure, he reimagines the political history of twentieth-century India by drawing parallels with the mythical narrative of the Mahabharata. Reflecting on the novel, Lal remarks that *The Great Indian Novel* portrays the "multiple realities" and "multiple interpretations of reality," that is India. He reveals:

> The Mahabharata has come to stand for so much in the popular consciousness of Indians: the personages in it have become household words, standing for public virtues and vices and the issues it rises, as well as the values it seeks to promote, are central to an understanding of what makes India. To take characters and situations that are so laden with resonance and to alter and shape them to tell a contemporary story, was a challenge that offered a rare opportunity to strike familiar chords while playing an unfamiliar tune.... (5)

Tharoor underscores the significance of the ancient Indian epic within the framework of the postmodern era through his storytelling. He contends: "It is precisely the epic's appeal to non-Sanskrit scholars that has ensured the Mahabharata's present day relevance and given me material for my novel.... I found the Mahabharata the perfect vehicle for an attempt to retell the political history of 20th century India, through a fictional recasting of its events, episodes and characters" (The Hindu). Tharoor revisits history with a perspective marked by objectivity and irony. His aim is to establish a connection between the events of mythology and the modern political history, achieving this by representing the past within the context of the present. As expressed by Lal, "Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its legends and the myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination, its events are the disturbing warp and woof of our age" (3). Similar to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* addresses pivotal moments in national history since the

colonial era, including peasant movements, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Partition of India, conflicts between India and China, India and Pakistan, and the tumultuous conditions during the Emergency. It embodies the traits of postmodernist historiographic metafiction, which scrutinizes and complicates the notion of history. Describing its attributes, Balaswamy states:

> Historiographic metafictional works problematize history, by portraying historical events and personalities only to subvert them. They attempt to re-write/re-present the past in fiction so that the past can be opened up to the present; by this they prevent the past from being conclusive and teleological; such metafictional works posit no single 'truth' but truths in the plural, never one Truth. It is just your version of truth against someone else's truth, so there is no falseness per se. Also, such truths are relative to the specific place and culture. (229)

Ved Vyas narrates the epic Mahabharata to Lord Ganesh in the eighteen parvas. In a parallel narrative approach, Tharoor has Ved Vyas extensively convey his story, thoughts, and memories to Ganapathi, an amanuensis, spanning across eighteen books. Tharoor incorporates certain episodes from mythology to symbolically represent events from twentieth-century political history. For instance, the defeat of Hidimba by Bhima symbolizes the liberation of Goa from Portuguese rule, and the episode where Jarasandha's body is torn into two by Bheema mirrors the creation of Bangladesh from Pakistan. Tharoor even alters the original Bheema-Bakasura wrestling match episode by substituting Bheema with Sahadeva, symbolizing India's defeat in the Indo-China war.

Tharoor employs satire to portray the epic characters as individuals in his narrative. For instance, Bhishma from the Mahabharata is renamed Gangaji, drawing clear parallels with Gandhiji through his words and actions, primarily centered on their shared "obsession with celibacy." The blind Dhritarashtra takes on the likeness of Jawaharlal Nehru, while Queen Gandhari, who gives birth to the formidable Priya Duryodhani, symbolizes the strength of a hundred evil sons, akin to Indira Gandhi. Other character associations include Pandu as Subhash Chandra Bose, Vidur as Sardar Patel, Drona as Jayaprakash Narayan, Yudhistir as Morarji Desai, Amba as Shikandi representing Godse, Karna as Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Bhima representing the army, and Arjuna symbolizing the Press.

Shishupal is satirically depicted as Lal Bahadur Shastri, and Draupadi Mokrasi represents "democracy." The powerful Kaurava clan mirrors the "Congress party," and Lord Krishna is caricatured as a local M.L.A. for the Kaurava party and secretary in a remote taluk in Kerala. Tharoor meticulously constructs parallels between the Mahabharata and contemporary political history in his narrative. In this storytelling, Gandhi serves as the vital link bridging the past and the present, thereby emphasizing continuity and relevance "immersing himself increasingly in the great works of the past and the present, reading Vedas and Tolstoy with equal involvement, studying the innumerable laws of Manu and the eccentric philosophy of Ruskin" (Tharoor 25). The story commences with the princely realm of Hastinapur falling under British control and then swiftly traverses through key events in the struggle for independence. These events encompass the Jallianwala Bagh massacre referred to as the Bibigarh Garden massacre, movements led by peasants and industrial workers, Gandhi's Dandi March also known as the Great Mango March in the novel the Partition, India's attainment of Independence, and the ominous era of the Emergency and its ensuing repercussions.

In the Mahabharata, Bhishma makes a solemn vow of lifelong celibacy to honour his father Shantanu's wish to marry Satyavathi, a fisherwoman. Gandhi, when he reached the age of 45, made a deliberate choice to practice sexual self-discipline akin to Bhishma's commitment. He elaborates on this decision in his autobiography, *My Experiment with Truth*, stating:

> After full discussion and mature deliberations, I took the vow in 1906. I had not shared my thoughts with my wife until then, but only consulted her at the time of taking the vow. She had no objection. But I had great difficulty in making the final resolve. I had not the necessary strength. How was I to control my passions? The elimination of carnal relationship with one's wife seemed then a strange thing. (191-92)

Gandhi embraces a lifestyle characterized by simplicity and a close connection to nature. His practices, such as vegetarianism and nature therapy, are often seen as distinctive attributes of his Gandhian way of life. Sumit Sarkar, a renowned historian, provides an explanation of Gandhi's uncomplicated approach to political life. When he says that Gandhi is worth noting while "Travelling third

class, speaking in simple Hindustani, wearing a loin cloth only from 1921 onwards, using the image of Tulsidas's Ramayana so deep rooted in popular religion of the North Indian Hindu rural masses" (Tharoor 181). Tharoor humorously and provocatively portrays Gandhi's way of life in a whimsical and unconventional fashion:

> Thin as a papaya plant ... peering at you through round-rimmed glasses that gave him the look of a startled owl. And the rest of his appearance was hardly what you would call prepossessing. He had by then burned his soup-and-fish and given away the elegant suits copied for him from the best British magazines by the court master-tailor; but to make matters worse, he was now beginning to shed part or most of even his traditional robes on all but state occasion. People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loincloth. (35)

During the struggle for independence, Gandhi, known as Ganga Datta in the novel, played a pivotal role in reshaping India's political and economic landscape. His message served as an inspiration for people from all walks of life to join the fight for freedom. Truth, satyagraha (nonviolent resistance), and non-violence were the tools he employed in the battle against British colonial rule. Gandhi's unconventional methods and his ability to mobilize the masses left the British authorities bewildered. His active involvement in grassroots peasant movements had a ripple effect on national politics and played a significant role in giving rise to the concept of "nationalism" in the country. The episodes in Champaran in Northwest Bihar and Kheda in Gujarat are notable examples of this transformation. In Champaran, sporadic resistance had emerged during the 1860s against the exploitative tinkatia system "when European planters had involved the cultivators in agreement that forced them cultivate indigo on 3/20th of their holdings (known as the tinkatiya system)" (Chandra 178). Gandhi explains tinkatiya system in his autobiography "as three kathas out of twenty (which makes one acre) had to be planted with indigo" (371). Ved Vyas tells it to Ganapathi: "under the colonialist laws, three tenths of every man's land had to be consecrated to indigo, since the British needed cash-crops more than they needed wheat" (Tharoor 50). Gandhi's investigation and the attention it garnered forced the British colonial government to establish a committee to investigate the issue.

This committee subsequently recommended compensating the peasants and abolishing the tinkatiya system. Tharoor portrays this movement with great admiration for Gandhiji: "Imagine it for yourself, Ganapathi, frail, bespectacled Gangaji defying the might of the British Empire, going from village to village proclaiming the right of the people to live rather than grow dye" (51).

Gandhi's Salt Satyagraha emerged as a potent instrument within the Civil Disobedience Movement. During a meeting of the Congress working committee held at Sabarmati from February 14 to 16, 1930, Mahatma Gandhi was granted the authority to initiate the "Civil Disobedience Movement" at a location and time of his choosing. His initial choice was to challenge the salt tax, which he regarded as one of the most oppressive acts imposed by the British. Commencing on March 12, Gandhi, accompanied by 78 participants from various regions of India, embarked on a march from Sabarmati Ashram to Dandi. This journey took on the form of a "padayatra" and reached Dandi on April 6, 1930. By symbolically picking up a handful of salt, Gandhiji officially inaugurated the Civil Disobedience Movement, "a movement that was to remain unsurpassed in the history of the Indian national movement for the country-wide mass participation it unleashed" (Chandra 272). He urged the populace to produce and sell salt, designating the week from April 6 to April 13 as a national week. He encouraged people to picket liquor stores and boycott foreign-made clothing. Numerous legislators and government employees resigned from their positions, and many individuals defied salt regulations, while peasants evaded paying taxes and debts. The country was in a state of open rebellion. Throughout the movement, Gandhi implored people not to resort to violence. In his novel, Tharoor amusingly parodies this historical struggle as "The Great Mango March," where the objective is to pluck the "forbidden fruit," playfully highlighting Gandhi's remarkable achievement: "The Crowd cheered, and yelled, and swarmed around Gangaji as he stepped off the platform. The mango he had plucked, that first fruit of India's liberation, was instantly auctioned to enthusiastic acclaim, for the princely sum of sixteen hundred rupees" (124).

Tharoor presents the Jallianwala Bagh massacre as the Bibigarh Garden Massacre or Hastinapur Massacre. This tragic event, considered one of the darkest days in the history of the freedom struggle, shook the nation on the afternoon of

April 13, 1919. General Dyer's orders to open fire on unarmed crowds gathered at the meeting resulted in the deaths of approximately five hundred people and injuries to twelve hundred others. In response to this atrocity, Rabindranath Tagore renounced his Knighthood, and Mahatma Gandhi returned the Kaiser-I-Hind medal, which had been awarded to him during the Boer War, as acts of protest. Tharoor also references the Sepoy's Mutiny of 1857, often referred to by imperial historians as the "Sepoy Mutiny," as the initial episode in the history of the Freedom Movement. This national uprising, he suggests, was carefully downplayed by imperial accounts. Tharoor regards the Quit India Movement of 1942-45 as a significant milestone in India's struggle for freedom since the 1857 revolt. He criticizes the communal riots and chaos during the Partition, suggesting that these were instigated by the British. He raises questions regarding "the killing, the violence, the carnage, the sheer mindlessness of the destruction ..." (226). Tharoor portrays the assassination of the Father of the Nation by a Hindu extremist by drawing a parallel with the mythical account of the death of the revered figure, Mahaguru Bheeshma. In doing so, he reveals the power-hungry tendencies of leaders like Jinnah and Nehru, who, in their pursuit of authority, disregard Gandhi's counsel to offer the prime ministership to Jinnah as a means to maintain the unity of India.

Tharoor draws a comparison between Priya Duryodhani's abuse of power during the Emergency and the episode of "disrobing Draupadi" in the myth, symbolizing the stripping away of the dignity of Indian freedom. When her election was nullified by the Allahabad High Court in 1971 due to allegations of using government resources for political purposes and a growing protest led by Lok Nayak Jayaprakash Narayan was underway, she declared an "internal emergency" under Article 352 of the constitution, following the advice of her legal advisor Shakuni Shankar Dey (Siddartha Shankar Ray). Ved Vyas expresses sorrow over the empowerment of Priya Duryodhani in this context "to prohibit, proscribe, profane, prolate, prosecute or prostitute, all the freedoms the national movement had fought to attain during all those years of my Kaurava life" (357). Mohan Dharia, a Member of Parliament, voices his criticism of it "as the blackest day in Indian Democracy and in the history of our country" (Nayar 68). During the Emergency, it is the press that vigorously opposes the erosion of democracy.

Tharoor portrays Arjuna as a representative symbol of the press. The marriage between Arjuna and Draupadi symbolizes the union of democracy and the press, representing the voice of the people. In contrast to the myth where Yudhistir loses everything to Duryodhana in a deceitful game of dice with Shakuni, Tharoor depicts Arjuna, symbolizing the press, engaging in a decisive encounter with Priya Duryodhani to reclaim the nation's self-respect and freedom. The act of dice-playing here symbolizes the general elections held in the aftermath of the Emergency. Ved Vyas asserts that in ancient times, politics and epic battles like Kurukshetra were driven by noble purposes, while in contemporary India, politics is primarily motivated by financial gain and self-interest. He expresses his sorrow when he says that "Today's India is a land of adulteration, black-marketing, corruption, communal strife, dowry killings, you know the rest, and that this is the only India that matters" (Tharoor 412). In *The Great Indian Novel*, the political history of India is cleverly depicted through the lens of a mythical narrative. Tharoor employs a postmodernist approach to reinterpret history in this novel.

The influence of history and magic realism has become prominent, reshaping the landscape of Indian English fiction. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a prime example of this transformation. Through its postmodern and deconstructive approach, the novel blends myth, history, and contemporary realities into a rich tapestry. Tharoor ingeniously superimposes modern politics onto the structure of the Mahabharata, drawing parallels between ancient characters and contemporary figures, effectively reimagining the political history of twentieth-century India. The novel, like Rushdie's work, engages with pivotal historical moments, including the freedom struggle, the Partition, and the period of Emergency. It embodies the characteristics of postmodernist historiographic metafiction, challenging the notion of a single historical truth and offering multiple interpretations of reality. Tharoor's narrative technique involves Ved Vyas dictating his story to Ganapathi, covering eighteen books and incorporating episodes from mythology to symbolically represent modern events. This approach allows for a seamless integration of the past into the present, providing a fresh perspective on history. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor uses satire and humor to portray historical and political figures, creating a witty and thought-provoking narrative. The novel also underscores the enduring relevance of the Mahabharata

in the postmodern era, emphasizing its appeal to a wide audience beyond Sanskrit scholars. Overall, the novel exemplifies the postmodernist reimagining of history in Indian English literature, offering a unique lens through which to view the nation's past and present. It serves as a testament to the ever-evolving and dynamic nature of Indian literature.

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