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Reinterpretation of Myth and History to Reconstruct the Past Reality : Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is very fascinating it deals with the Indian myth of *Mahabharata* and history of freedom struggle. He recites the history of modern India through the epic story. The novel tries to build a history of the colonial and postcolonial India in terms of real events and characters from the twentieth century Indian socio-political philosophy. Figures from Indian history are transformed into mythological characters and mythological story of the epic is retold as a history of India. In this research paper, I seek to focus on the new historical notion that reinterprets myth and history for reconstruction of the past reality. To develop modern sensibility about the great legends and to define value of the past is the second major aim of this article. The article aims at building a new nation on rational lines with changed political ideologies and altering political scenario. The research paper is divided into three sections, section first puts forth the conception of myth and history in fiction, second analyses of the novel and section third concludes the paper with research findings.

Keywords: Myth, History, Colonialism, Post colonialism, Independence, Political Ideologies.

Introduction

Many Indian writers used myth and history in their creative writings to bring out greater truths and concealed meanings. Where myth strengthens the functionality of a literary piece, history justifies its authenticity. The reality of a literary work which lies within the imagination of the reader must also have the scope of transcending its historical position. Here arises the need for re-writing the epics in terms of contemporary history. Murry Krieger rightly observed that "history itself must be seen, not as brute facts, but as subjects to the forms of the human discourse that creates it as meaningful for the rest of us. All empirical reality, including the raw materials for our formulations of history, is seen as oppressively outside us, a formless continuum that threatens our freedom to create the purposive and causal relations which convert these materials into the humanistic disciplines."¹ Now many contemporary writers write with an informed awareness and aim at re-defining their identity, evaluating their present, repositioning their past while asserting images of myth and history. Twentieth century several Indian writers consciously used myth and history as a literary device in their creative writings. In Rohinton

Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, Manju Kapur's *Difficult Daughter's*, Kunal Basu's *Opium Clerk* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Shadow Lines*, for example, myths and history reappear with a new meaning and an immediacy of appeal. They employed an ancient myth in a contemporary milieu and reinterpret in terms of historical significance. This mythological method of embodying contemporary consequence in an ancient myth is also extensively used in postmodern Indian English Fiction. It was started with Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and enriched with Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*.

Indian writers should not commit pen to writing until he has spent ten years of his mature life carefully brooding the Indian classics, learning the Indian tradition and absorbing the Indian myth and history. Aijaz Ahmed expresses a similar view when he says that "colonialism becomes a trans-historical thing always present and always in a process of dissolution in one part of the world or another."² On the other hand Helen Tiffin says that "History may have "happened" somewhere, but it issues recorded as "event" as text. Since the history of post-colonial territories, was, until recently, largely a narrative constructed by the colonizer, its fictions and the languages in which they are written, operate as means to cultural control."³ Tharoor writes in his "Afterword" issues in this novel are based on people and events described in the great epic... a work remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India." (P.419) That's why, it is necessary to interpret myth and history to reconstruct the value of past reality and to develop modern sensibility about the great legends of the Indian freedom struggle.

Concept of Historiography in Fiction

Historical writing does not refer to the actual reality of the past because history mediates through literature. Literature plays an important role in the articulation of social practices. Society is a product of ideology and situated in relation with culture which is similar to the literary text in its endless play of signs and difference in meaning. Anusha U. R, commented in her article that "History in the postmodern world is problematized and its truth and objectivity are called into question. The arbitrary relationship between words and worlds problematize the capacity of history to mirror reality. Different interpretations of the same historical events by historians reveal the social and political codes that decide their versions of the past."⁴ Tharoor revealed historical consciousness in his representation of the partition, the emergency and other historical events. He has represented partition as a metaphor to reconstruction of the past reality from the fractured perception of history. The truth of the past can be verified in history only by relying upon literary evidence of the present. The imaginative re-telling and re-casting of Indian history and mythology in a culturally hybrid environment with innovative literary technique give many literary work to different setting. This trend setter writers have given a new direction to Indian English writing.

The Great Indian Novel, Tharoor recast Indian history as mythical and democracy as caricature. Madhu Jain remarked in his review, "Shashi Tharoor has taken the *Mahabharata* as a

blueprint and filled it with a contemporary cast for his witty send-up of independent India. A sort of India revisited with the dramatis personae of the epic getting quite a bruising”.⁵ Novel challenges the modern myths of Indian independence and a narrative of democracy. He observes in different narratives multiple interpretations of reality. Tharoor’s creativity lies in revealing how the methodology of the ancient epic can replay the political system of modern India. This implicates that the process of history making are not separate from literature making. Tharoor combines the creativity of fiction and the scholarship of factual information to identify the historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru and Jinnah with their mythological counterparts. In employing such technique, Tharoor imparts the objectivity of factual history with potential for fictional probability. He juxtaposes the two narratives to foreground history as highly transformative discourse ever open to reinterpretation. Tharoor’s open ended narrative re-opens the narratives of the fiction and history and the metaphorical description affirms the endless possibilities of meaning.

The real value and standards are derived from myth and history. *The Great Indian Novel* is a reconstructed text blending myth and history. Tharoor’s mockery to the national leaders is a part of his new narrative technique and evolution of new political archetype. The great leaders like Gandhi and Nehru received here a total disregard at the hand of Shashi Tharoor. He rejected the great leader being disloyal to them self, who trapped in the local politics and forget the ethical norms from their moral commitment. He tells India’s story of bitter colonization experience and continues to the struggles of Indians to decolonize it. The novel is deep rooted in Indian myth and history. The binary opposites of tradition and modernity lie in the pre-figuration of major characters.

Concept of Mythology in Fiction

The great Indian civilization has been influenced by religious text, especially the two great epics the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. Both these epics written by Rishi Valmiki and Rishi Ved Vyas respectively reflect the culture of the sub-continent and its people. The *Mahabharata* envisages the tales from the great and ancient land of Bharata. It reveals a rich civilization and a highly evolved society. The *Mahabharata* identifies and establishes the intrinsic humanity that does not recognize the limitations imposed by the caste, color, language and boundaries. Centuries ago it was proclaimed concerning this great text, “what is not in it is nowhere.”⁶

The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale describing the successional struggle over the throne of the empire of Hastinapur between Pandava’s and the Kaurava’s, two branches of the heirs of the king Shantanu. In this novel, Tharoor reorganizes the story of the developing Indian democracy as struggle between groups and individuals, closely associated by their personal and political histories. Thus Tharoor has achieved two ambitious projects in one stroke, recreating the epic Indian tale as well as narrating the history of twentieth century India. The retelling of the same story with improvised additions and deletions offers an air of romances and freshness to it. He

uses the digressional method of storytelling as used in the great epics very effectively and by making a conscious use of mythical events and situations to enhancing the effect of the contemporary scenario. This is very aptly put in by Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book *The Twice Born Fiction*, She commented that, "the conscious use of myth for enhancing the effect of a contemporary situation is a device that the Indian novelist has emulated from the west but has naturalized it to the Indian soil. A world view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience and the Indian epics offer the basis of such a common background which permeates the collective unconscious of the whole nation."⁷

Mythological Past, Hunger for Power

The characters of *Mahabharata* play an important role in formation of ideals. The story of the epic essentially deals with the royalty of the ancient state of Hastinapur. It describes the ancient way of life and also human nature and behavior in various circumstances. The war fought at Kurukshetra, between the Kaurava's and the Pandava's, is not only reason behind Ved Vyas's choice of the title of the epic. It is justified more appropriately, by the fact that it picturizes the life, the emotions, the sentiments, the tears and similes of the people of Bharata. It is this all pervasive aspect of the epic that makes it a great Indian literary piece and thus the *Mahabharata*. C. Rajagopalachari, in his preface to the translation of the *Mahabharata* also states, "*Mahabharata* is one of our noblest heritages..... It strengthens the soul and drives home – as nothing else does – the vanity of ambition and the evil and futility of anger and hatred."⁸

Analysis of *The Great Indian Novel*

i) Fictionalizing Political Leaders with Mythology

Shashi Tharoor, an eminent writer of both fiction and non-fiction has reinvented and remolded the stories of the great epic as an account of the political history of the India, in his debut novel called *The Great Indian Novel*. However, the novel takes its title the *Mahabharata* as a primary source of inspiration. In Sanskrit Maha means great and Bharata means India and therefore Tharoor calls his novel *The Great Indian Novel*. The novel is an exhaustive analysis of the influence of the *Mahabharata*, regarding the Indian freedom struggle, which leads to the partition of the India and correlating the two, Tharoor himself confesses, "Both are stories that at different levels are told and retold in Indian culture. In my intermixing the two, I was able to cast a perhaps cynical modern sensibility upon the great legends of the past, but equally was able to cast some of the values of that passed onto the experiences of the more recent present."⁹

He not only juxtaposes the atmospherics of the *Mahabharata* with modern history. The organization of the chapters, the novel imitates the organization of the *Mahabharata*. The novel has eighteen "books," just as the *Mahabharata* has eighteen books, corresponding with the war between Pandava's and Kaurava's which lasted for eighteen days. In the opening chapter, entitled "The Twice-Born Tale" the narrator declares his intention to have "The Song of Modern India" transcribed in his very own words. Ved Vyas dictates the whole story to Ganapathi,

similarly imposed by Vyasa to Ganesh in the opening part of the ancient epic. *The Great Indian Novel* portrays the narrative of the battle for independence of Hastinapur under the administration of MahaguruGangaji (Mahatma Gandhi), his acclaimed Mango March (Salt March) and the birth of Indian democracy with a blind nationalist (Jawaharlal Nehru) and a British Vicereine (Lady Mountbatten). Other significant characters are Karna (Md. Ali Jinnah), Pandu, the Pale (Subhas Chandra Bose) and Duryodhani (Indira Ghandhi).

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Bhishma of the *Mahabharata* and Gandhi of the Indian freedom struggle become Ganga Datta or Gangaji. Tharoor allegorically draws a parallel between these two, on embedded in mythological past and with the recent history, by stressing that the two were equally serious in their principles and both intentionally surrendered their claim to power and administration of the nation. Thus setting up of Gangaji's character as a sincere, selfless and successful politician, Tharoor discusses his followers and the other members of the Indian freedom struggle.

In the *Mahabharata*, Dhritrashtra and Pandu had a right to the throne of Hastinapur after Bhishma, in the Indian political history, Nehru and Subhas were the contenders left for leading the Indian polity after Gandhi. Thus Tharoor equals Dhritrashtra with Nehru, and Pandu with Subhas. As the novel proceeds, Gangaji's bias against Pandu becomes evident, and so does his preference for Dhritrashtra. It was because of Gangaji's favors towards him that Dhritrashtra was able to create a place for himself in the country's political arena, while Pandu had to pay heavily for Gangaji's indifference towards him. The fact that Gangaji supported Dhritrashtra in the *Mahabharata* in the same way Bhishma's supported Dhritrashtra and his Kaurava sons, despite his awareness of their falsity. It is also suggestive of Gandhi's unreasonable and blenders bias in favor of Nehru.

Tharoor underlines how the hunger for power, which was the cause of the battle of Kurukshetra in the *Mahabharata*. It was equally important theme in the political scene of both pre and post partition of India. In the processes of defining this aspect, he introduces the character of Karna, who stands for Jinnah. Despite belonging to the same clan, he was deprived of his rightful position because of the circumstances of his birth. However, Karna fights courageously for his rights and finally succeeds in setting up a new nation called Karnistan which stands for Pakistan. This division of the India into Pakistan and Hindustan on the 14th of August 1947 was recorded as 'the partition' in the Indian history, an event that influenced the future of two nations.

Shashi Tharoor narrates many characters that are influential even today in the India. The novel started with Gangaji's (Gandhi's) appearance on the Indian political scene and ends with Priya Duryodhani's return to power after the fall of the Janta Government. Tharoor narrates Gandhiji's character as "while he was alive, he was impossible to ignore: once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate." (47) He established Gangaji as the most pious leader of the freedom fighters, who toiled hard to lay the foundation independent India. He imbued with the spirit of truth, ahimsa and Satyagraha. But on the other hand he was responsible for the partition of India.

Tharoor does not suggest directly that Gangaji (Gandhiji) was responsible for the disaffection between the Hindus and the Muslims. He gives clear indication that Gangaji's ideas and principles were responsible for alienations of political leader like Karna from Kauravas party. He describes Karna's disapproval of Gandhiji in the following words:

“Karna was not much of Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of Hindu the Mahaguru's traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient text, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealized pre- British past that Karna did not believe in.... All this made the young man mistrustful of the Great Teacher.... And Gangaji's mass politics were, to Karna, based on an appeal to the wrong instincts: they embodied an atavism that in his view would never take the country forward”. (142) Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* illuminates the sad misfortune of India that could not produce another leader of Gangaji's stature. Dhritrashtra as the leader of Kauravas who betrayed Gangaji's faith and trust as soon as liberated India was born. Thus Tharoor has treated history as a raw material and transformed the characters. He picks up story and moral attitudes of the characters. He mythologized historical notions to transform his art and not hesitate, even violating them if necessary.

ii) Recent Historiography of Popular Incident

Shashi Tharoor also comments on various popular and critical incidents in Indian history. He depicted colonial incident which focuses the grotesque brutality of the British in the novel is Bibigarh massacre referred to the Jalianwala Bagh tragedy in the Indian history. The description of Jalianwala Bagh massacre by Tharoor shows his agreement with the likes of Samuel P. Huntington, who believe that “the West won the world not by the superiority of its ideas or values or religion but rather by superiority in applying organized violence.”¹⁰ The similar incidents in the novel are ‘Chaurasta’ event, actually known as the Chauri Chaura incident, Nathu Ram Godse killed Mahatma Gandhi, illegitimate relationship with Viceroy's wife lady Mountbatten, emergency incident and most critical incident of Kashmir's king.

The Maharaja Vyabhichar Sing signed the contract of Kashmir agreement simply on the demand of the women in his bed. Historians generally believe that instead of the Maharaja, as shown by Tharoor in his fictionalized historical story, it was Nehru who caused delay in the signing of the contract. According to them, as soon as the Pakistani forces attacked Kashmir, the Maharaja had sent his wazir to Delhi, requesting the Indian government to give military support to Kashmir, against the Pakistan's, while in return Kashmir would join to India. Nehru, the prime minister of India, kept the wazir waiting in Delhi for three days, while Pakistan's forces moved into Kashmir. Nehru agreed to help Kashmir only after the Maharaja appointed Sheikh Abdullah as the chief minister of Kashmir. Moreover when the Indian Army was steadily and successfully pushing back the enemy, a ceasefire was announced by the United Nations. Nehru had decided to go to the U. N. O., a decision that earned him the utter disdain of the people of India. In the narrative, Tharoor suggests that Nehru had acted in accordance with the suggestion of the Vicereine, and had taken an absurd decision for which India has to pay to the present day.

Tharoor's novel emerges as an outstanding exemplification of the persistence of British colonialism, in the liberated and free India. His fiction explicitly reveals that while before 15th August, 1947, the country was exploited by aliens, after independence she was forced to suffer at the hands of her own leader. Tharoor's much praised hero Gangaji, who had non-violently shaken mighty British Empire but became weak to use the same weapon to prevent partition of the subcontinent. That's why he was murdered by Nathu Ram Godse, represented as 'Shikhandi' in the novel. Shikhandi, who is actually Amba in epic, changed sex and name killed Gangaji for his mistake to withdraw from political scene of partition. It shows that Nathu Ram killed Gandhiji because he felt that Mahatma cheated him and the nation. Tharoor's Shikhandi not only expressed his personal reasons for killing Gangaji but also echoed those of Nathu Ram Godse's Gandhi's assassination. Nathu Ram perceived Gandhi to be unjust in forcing the Indian government to give fifty five crores of rupees to Pakistan at a time of partition which returned with invaded India in Kashmir. Pakistan purchased weapon with that money for fighting Indian forces. Perhaps Gandhi's fast is not accepted by Godse and many Hindus had begun to doubt the wisdom of Gandhi's dabbling of politics. Further, question of Hindu-Muslim not only communal but became international in the period of Nehru and even today we are facing same everlasting problem. Thus Tharoor suggests that Gangaji, who stood for Hindu-Muslim unity throughout his life, ironically became responsible for the augmentation of the communal tensions between Hindu and Muslims. Commenting on Tharoor's comprehension and depiction of Mahatma Gandhi's role in colonial India, Dr. Dhar observes, "It is somewhat ironical that a person who fought all his life for Hindu-Muslim unity has to be made responsible for encouraging Muslim separatism, but this is implicit in Tharoor's understanding of Gangaji and of several historians too."¹⁰ Thus many historical incident he tried to reinterpret with his own imaginative genius. Even today the perception of these incidents is totally fractured and cause of communal turmoil in the society. Through reinterpretation, he tried to less down the tensions based on earlier consumption of the history. He also tried to fetch the people from their imaginative glorious past to the current nude realities of the modern life. Some bitter historical incident should be purified and reconstruct with new perspective for the better health of the society.

Reinterpretation of Myth and History to Reconstruct Past Reality

The epical, narrative method of the novel is another noteworthy aspect of the postcolonial writing. While history both as context and as reality is a pervasive presence in postmodern Indian English fiction. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* weaves both myth and history into the fictional narrative is indeed literary master piece of our time. The novel is generally cast in first person narrative, a series of the narrator's monologues. Ved Vyas dictates his story to Ganapathi and seems to be an embodiment of time. He appears to be timeless in the novel and instead of dying towards the end he merely abandons the scene. He also refers to his legs as "my ageless legs" exemplifying the author's indicative style of writing. Ganapathi is established, not simply by the mention of his name, but also by the description given by Ved Vyas.

Myths are the manifestations of man's basic instincts and conflicts, additionally useful means to link the past with the present. They are used to prove that man in spite of all his progress in science is basically the same being he was thousands of years ago. Since the mythical figures symbolize the aspirations of the community, especially the quest myth figures, writers have imaged them to symbolize their individual aspiration as well as of their community. *Mahabharata* is a guardian to mankind. In our present life, we cannot get answers of many problems and so we take the support of myth to solve these problems. The myth may answer man's longing for beyond any doubt his need-to live in a world cut to the limits of his mental and verbal measuring instruments. His determination for rational reliability may pressure him not exclusively to see the world as a reflection of himself additionally to have belief in it. To ask him to reflect that self-reflection as though it were a moral obligation. Use of mythology is a distinguished aspect of the novel. Myth based not on scientific truth but instead on one's beliefs and faith. It is a part and parcel of Indian culture and tradition. Reinterpretation of myth will certainly widen and transform the horizon of modern life.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a mind-blowing text of postmodern Indian English Literature. Myth as interpretive and narrative strategy is a significant aspect of this novel. History both as context and as reality is pervasive presence in postmodern Indian English novels. The novel weaves myth and history into the fictional narratives is indeed literary masterpieces of postcolonial fiction. Even today we need to recast the value of Indian freedom struggle because always serious social communal problems disturb the peace of tranquility of India means the new generation is far away from the patriotic movement and that's why need to reevaluate the importance of Indian myth and colonial history with new perspective. The language of the people of the partition sounds different in our context. We, at the present movement experience communal riots which are only a consequence of the partition. Still we are facing Kashmir problem, Hindu-Muslim opposition and separatist's movement in north India. The partition of the past could be called the cause of a communal unrest of the present-day but the reverse does not hold. A communal unrest today can help to brighten the effect of the partition. Hence the partition cannot be lived; it can only be reconstructed through fiction that exerts pressure on the interpretative imagination, a text that is alien to the present since the past is a foreign country and a country of the mind. Through this allegorical amalgamation of the ancient and the modern times, he highlights that the essential nature of man perpetually remains the same and history repeats itself. In essence, the nucleus of the novel takes the womb of postmodern sensibility for granted. The answer offered to communal problems is that unless certain material conditions are available, unless the soil of society is furrowed and tilled for certain modern mentalities and not just germination is sufficient. In fact, the very concept of such a possibility might seem absurd, if not unwelcoming. We have to germinate seeds of communal harmony, breed and brought up with great zeal that is possible with only reinterpretation of myth and history to reconstruct past reality. A fuller, keener and more humanly illuminating historical awareness must modify the generalized, ideology bound reading made by the historians with the reinterpretations made upon them by the writers.

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