



# “BLINDNESS AS METAPHOR IN THAROOR'S "THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL”.

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## Abstract:

Disability Studies has emerged as a significant field of study in the late twentieth century, primarily, in The U.S, The U.K, and Canada. This field of study examines the social, cultural, and environmental nature of disability, and projects it as an interdisciplinary academic terrain that focuses on the contributions, experiences, history and culture of people with disabilities. Blindness is usually identified as one of the most widespread and frequently encountered disability in literary genres, and in literature, blindness has been represented as a topic through the ages. In the West, many analytical studies have emerged in relation to blindness as linked to the field of Disability Studies. Among them David Bolt's *The Metanarrative of Blindness: A Re-Reading of Twentieth Century Anglophone Writing*, and Alice Hall's *Disability and Literature* are prominent critical texts. David Bolt explores different forms of impairment and he tries to show the diversity and ambiguity of the term 'disability'. Alice Hall in her book tries to explore formal and theoretical questions about disability and its representation in literature and culture. Not much attention has been given to representations of disability in Indian Literatures .There is a lack of analytical writing and literary criticism on the depiction of blindness in Indian Literatures. In short, Disability Studies has emerged as a current field of enquiry within literature, and in the West many studies have already emanated on the representations of disability in literature.

Key words: Blindness, impairment, depiction, representation, metaphor, blind love.

The present paper follows a line of enquiry in relation to the disability of blindness in two Indian Literary texts. Dhritarashtra, a blind character in *The Mahabharata* re-emerges as the 20<sup>th</sup> Century Dhritarashtra in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. The proposed paper examines Tharoor's Dhritarashtra and his blindness in relation to the blindness of the archetypal epic character. The paper argues that in both texts the disability term blindness functions as a metaphor to signify a flaw in an otherwise influential and powerful character. If in *The Mahabharata* Dhritarashtra's blindness signifies his blind affection for his elder son, in *The Great Indian Novel*, the blindness of the modern Dhritarashtra (Nehru) stands for Nehru's blind love for his only daughter. Both these lead to disasters and have political consequences that affect the destinies of a kingdom or Nation. The paper will elaborate on the metaphor of blindness as used in these texts, using conceptual frames from Alice Hall's essay titled, "Blindness and the Short Story".

A central character of Indian epic, *The Mahabharata* is the blind king Dhritarashtra, who is largely viewed in a negative light. In fact, it is because of his ambition to crown his son Duryodhana as king as opposed to his more deserving nephew Yudistira that the epic battle between the cousins- the Kauravas and Pandavas was fought. Dhritarashtra's blindness becomes metaphorical, suggestive of his inability to judge between right and wrong. In spite of realising that Duryodhana has taken the side of falsehood and injustice, he as the king, refuses to see the truth. Dhritarashtra's blindness is not a case of mere physical blindness; it is actually a reference to his failure to see the 'Truth' of Duryodhana's wickedness. He was not only blind, but he was blinded by his love for his son to see the truth as it emerged and act in an impartial and objective way. When confronted by Vidura, the wise one, about his inability to stop the war, Dhritarashtra says; "Vidhura, try to understand I was born blind, how could I have discerned the real world or recognized the social codes". Dhritarashtra probably was the only person who could have advised Duryodhana to give up his unreasonable animosity towards his cousins, the Pandavas and avoid the war. Duryodhana had much respect for his father. So, he might have listened to him. But, Dhritarashtra chose to support his son, in his unreasonableness instead of correcting him. He allowed himself to be blinded by his overwhelming love for his son. Dhritarashtra becomes a metaphor for the whole dilemma of *The Mahabharata*, and Dhritarashtra the blind king seemed to have ruled over a kingdom or people who were also affected by this mental blindness, which in turn leads to ethical paralysis. Shashi Tharoor in his 20<sup>th</sup> century novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, re-tells

the story of Dhritarashtra's blindness using the reference of Nehru's blindness. Tharoor throws light on Nehru's blindness towards Indira Gandhi's highhandedness. Dhritarashtra's blindness metaphorically represents Nehru's ignorance of rural areas and a desire for Western type of administration and his excessive faith in Krishna Menon. At the surface level, the comparison of Dhritarashtra and Nehru seems odd because Dhritarashtra has some kind of negative role in *The Mahabharatha* whereas Nehru is considered as the architect of modern India. Dhritarashtra had bias against the sons of Pandu and he often took the side of his own son Duryodhana. Dhritarashtra was blind and thus was not able to see what was happening around him. He always ignored the misdeeds and high handedness of his son Duryodhana. This is the main focus of Shashi Tharoor's comparison of Dhritarashtra and Nehru.

The narrator of the novel, Ved Vyasa narrates the personality of Dhritarashtra in the following manner to Ganapathi: "he devoted himself to developing another kind of vision and became successively a formidable debater, a Bachelor of Arts and a Fabian Socialist" (p.41). These lines indirectly seem to refer to the variety of knowledge which Nehru imbibed at Harrow and Cambridge. Book 6<sup>th</sup> of Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, which deals with Gandhi's civil Disobedience movement of 1930, highlights the beginning of Nehru's political activities. It also focuses on Nehru's relationship with Gandhiji. Ved Vyasa narrates to Ganapathi: "Dhritarashtra, for one as you know, Ganapathi, had acquired in England traces of the right accent along with streaks of the wrong ideas. He had returned fired with Fabianism, which taught that equality and justice were everybody's right" (p.110). The narrative says: "Dhritarashtra found himself drawing the corollary that the Indian government could only fulfill its duty if it were a government of India run by Indians for the Welfare of Indians" (p.111). The above two passages show Nehru's vision for free India where everyone gets equal opportunities. Jawaharlal Nehru firmly believed that the concept of equal opportunity to all is not possible in British rule. These ideas paved the way for him to enter the Indian Freedom Struggle. In the novel, Gangaji launches an agitation against the government's decision to impose tax on mango. While addressing a mass, Gangaji tells people: "I myself am of little importance .....I am certain to be arrested....But donot assume that after I am gone, there will be no one left to guide you. It is not I, but Dhritarashtra who is your guide. He is blind, but he sees far. He has the capacity to lead" (121).

In this allegorical world, Gangaji stands for Gandhiji. In India's political history, Nehru's decision to take The Kashmir issue to the United states was severely criticized.Ved Vyasa narrates, "My blind and visionary

son had decided to appeal to the U.N. Many of us who never forgave him for that decision found all sorts of indefensible impulses behind it” (p.260). Shashi Tharoor narrates Nehru’s blind faith in Krishna Menon in the following way, “Dhritarashtra mean while was so content with the company his popular and successful Defence Minister that he had no desire to listen to the warnings that few of us who cared, dared to give him” (p.302). The next important aspect of Nehru’s policy, as pointed out by Tharoor is the principle of non-alignment; he says: “Dhritarashtra and Kanika evolved and elaborated the concept of non-alignment. In their articulate exegeses, this emerged as a lofty refusal to take sides in an immoral and destructive competition that could inflame the world” (p.295).

Through the lines, it is obvious that the reference is to Nehru who gave shape to the idea of non-alignment. Nehru was criticized as a naive fool who was blinded by sentiment and failed to guard Indian interests in the face of an inevitable communist betrayal. Commenting on Nehru’s dominant personality, Tharoor writes “Dhritarashtra had been like the immense banyan tree under whose shadow no other plant could grow” (310). It is true that many leaders fought for the freedom but Nehru became the Prime Minister of the country because of his towering and dominant personality.

Shashi Tharoor has narrated all these historical events in the 11<sup>th</sup> book of the novel. When Gangaji hears the news of partition, he says to Dhritarashtra, “If you agree to break the country, you will break my heart” (p.223). At this Dhritarashtra replies, it will break many many hearts; Gangaji, his chosen heir said sadly. Mine and all ours included. But we have no choice” (223). Tharoor narrates, “It was the first time we had ever gone against the expressed wishes of Gangaji. His era was over” (p.223).

Shashi Tharoor has made an attempt to show Dhritarashtra’s blindness in terms of Nehru’s blind affection for Indira Gandhi. Indira Gandhi is referred to in Tharoor’s text as Priya Duryodhani evoking memories of the archetypal Dhritarashtra and Duryodhana. For instance, Indira had dismissed the first elected communist government in Kerala in 1950, and Nehru had supported that. Nehru blinded by his love for Indira Gandhi, supports her arrogance and highhandedness which later hurt the basic structure of democracy like how she proclaimed Internal Emergency on 26<sup>th</sup> June 1975.

In the thirteenth book of the novel, Shashi Tharoor has discussed how Indira learnt to rule a country in the company of Nehru. Tharoor writes: “Dhritarashtra might forget Kanika’s advice, but Priya Duryodhani



would remember every word of the acerbic High commissioner's brutal counsel, and she would not hesitate to act on it" (p.273). These lines indicate, Indira Gandhi's understanding of a politics and her art of diplomacy.

In *The Mahabharatha*, Dhritarashtra's blindness stands as a metaphor for his unthinking blind affection for his wicked son, Duryodhana. In the *In The Great Indian Novel*, Dhritarashtra's (Nehru) 'blindness' is a metaphor for an idealistic vision (which cannot realistically see things), combined with a blind and ambitious affection for his only daughter. The blind king of *The Mahabharata* operates with a misplaced sense of ethics as a result of the aforesaid unqualified filial love and leads the country to war and, turmoil. The present - day Dhritarashtra's ambitions for his daughter and his dreamy visions of an ideal stay separate, but in combination, the effect is that of losing sight of the right track which building the Nation, that India. Blindness thus designates in both cases an internal disability to see and understand people as they ought to be seen and understood. Inspire of all their positive qualities pertaining to leaders, power, and affluence, an impaired internal vision, leads the two to personal and collective grief. The metaphor of blindness thus acquires a negative character in both the texts.

In both the texts one see how blindness emerges as a metaphor and how it is projected in a negative light. In these texts, as mentioned earlier, blindness stands for a lack of awareness about the things happening around, and the condition of not being able to see the 'Truth' as well as failure to see the faults of one's own children.

Metaphor is a figure of speech that makes a hidden comparison between two things that are unrelated, but which represents some similar characteristics.

In the texts which are referred to, *The Mahabharata* and *The Great Indian Novel*, blindness functions as a metaphor pertaining to the characters of Dhritarashtra and Nehru. Dhritarashtra's blindness is not a case of mere physical blindness; it is actually a reference to his failure to see 'Truth' as it is. In both the texts, blindness stands for the lack of awareness about its effects on people. Both Dhritarashtra and Nehru are blind to reality and though they are in a position where they could stop their children from being abrasive, and change their wrong decisions, they do not do it; instead both support the children and promote their unreasonable animosities.

Alice Hall, in her essay titled, “Blindness and the Short Story” examines the way in which blindness is represented as metaphor in two Western short stories: Lawrence’s “The Blind Man” and Carver’s “Cathedral”. Alice Hall says that in Lawrence’s story the normative idea of blindness is used as a metaphor in terms of deficiency. She tries to detail blindness as a metaphor by explaining the terms, darkness and light and blindness versus sight. She argues that the author places different social models of blindness as a source of “rich positivity” or “dependent deficiency” alongside each other. In this story, according to Hall, there is a mixture of discomfort and fascination involved in the act of looking at the blind.

In the story “Cathedral”, the man is physically blind but mentally he sees well, understands how life can be beautiful and is happy. The narrator, though he has sight, is blind to those things; blindness here helps to reveal the selfish nature of the narrator and to change his character. Blindness also helps to reveal Robert as the truly seeing one, wise one that guides the storyteller to new and positive experience. Thus, though in *The Mahabharata*, blindness is represented in a negative way, as also in *The Great Indian Novel*, in these short stories, blindness is represented in an inspiring and positive manner, because, characters who have sight are blinded to reality. Characters who have no sight are inspired characters and their blindness makes them realize their lack, open their eyes, and experience the world in new ways.

Through the use of blindness as metaphor, Tharoor has transferred a physical disability to a mental weakness, a tragic flaw, an internal deficiency. Through the outward description of the modern Dhritarashtra’s visual impairment, what is accessed is the meaning where blindness stands for lack of internal vision.

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