



USE OF MYTH IN NARRATING INDIAN HISTORY: A STUDY OF SHASHI THAROOR'S THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

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Abstract: This research paper examines Indian Postcolonial history of India and how its politicians are represented through myth in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor frames the progress of political events during colonial period and postcolonial period of India. His narrative represents the characters as the figures of *The Mahabharata* and the incidents of the Mythology take new forms in the contemporary politics of India. Tharoor has so dexterously knitted together the incidents and characters of the novel with that of the mythical characters of *The Mahabharata*.

Key Words: Mythology, Tropes, Battle, Politics, History, Retelling, Discrimination. The Mahabharata, British Raj.

Only the events occurred in the past do not constitute history. History is something whose sources must be available somewhere else. History is a continuous, systematic narrative of past events as relating to people, country, period, etc. History is usually written as a chronological account. R.G. Collingwood defined historical knowledge as essentially scientific, and saw the historian's task as the re-enactment of past thoughts. Probably the most frequently visited material for fiction writing is found in the treasure of mythology and history. The story, by and large, remains the same but the tone, the fabric, the representation and the interpretation very much depend on the writer's target audience. It is not a single cause but many causes which interact and reinforce historical events and the writer makes a selection of relevant causes according to the object of his writing in a particular literary work. Hayden White describes five levels of conceptualization in the historical work 'chronicle', 'story', 'mode of emplotment', 'mode of argument' and 'mode of ideological implication'. 'Chronicle' and 'story' may be referred to primitive elements in the historical account but both levels include selection and arrangement of data from the unprocessed historical record in such a way that it should be comprehensible to the reader. 'Chronicle' and 'story' are the first two stages in the making of historical work while the rest of the three stages, 'employment', 'argument', and 'ideological implication', make a group together as a historical work. Mode of ideological implication may be anarchist, radical, conservative or liberal. The historical approach of a literary writer is that of his own object of study, his distinctive historical field. This distinctive historical approach is a putative fusion of proper history and speculative history or philosophy of history. There are two fields of historical articulation: interior and exterior. A historian works within the boundary of exterior history and prioritizes interior articulation of history. So this is inventive arrangement of unprocessed history in the literary interpretation of events. In this process, the historical events become altered or slightly altered from the historical field in the literary work. It may be called a combination of realism and relativism. Shashi Tharoor fictionalizes the historical events by using myth and historical characters and events together. The history is always literal whereas literature is always figurative and uses certain devices like tropes and metaphors to transform the historical events in a literary text. Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, De Lillo's *Underground*, and Roth's *American Pastoral* and, of course, Shashi Tharoor *The Great Indian Novel* are the examples of retelling history. Hayden White calls it, the 'novelesque history'.

The Great Indian Novel blends 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 novel is deep rooted in Indian myth and history. Geeta M. Patil mentioned Tharoor's statement in her Ph.D thesis:

I grew up here (India). My intellect and my books are recorded and produced based on information growing in India. That's why India is very important to me, and I want to move to India and the only way to do that is through my writing. I have learned things that are important to me, and I believe they are important to other Indians as well. I am convinced at some

point of history that he has not yet discovered the world beyond the United Nations, but Indian world abroad. I have done this to some extent in my newspapers, so including it in my magazine is one of the possible places, but soon I don't have enough to say about India.... (Patil 36)

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 correlates them. The novel has eighteen books, just as *The Mahabharata* has eighteen books corresponding with the eighteen day war between Pandava and Kaurava. Use of mythology is a distinguished aspect of the novel. Myths are based not on scientific truth but instead on one's beliefs and faith. It is a part and parcel of Indian culture and tradition. Mythologizing certainly widens and transforms the horizon of fiction writing. Similarly some researchers from Nagpur University are investigating Tharoor's work. Hitendra B. Dhote, developed the title; A Critical Study of Social, Political and Cultural Ideology in Shashi Tharoor's novel. Sanjayji Banarse has worked under title, Shashi Tharoor's Works (2008). Amol Mendhe also published a thesis on Themes and Techniques in Shashi Tharoor's Novel (2010). He has discussed *The Great Indian Novel* from a different perspective. Tapan Kumar Ghosh wrote a book on Shashi Tharoor *The Great Indian Novel: A Critical Study* in 2008. This book is a comprehensive study and a true attempt to explore this unknown novel in significant ways. *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is full with commentary on social, political history of India. The following are two experimental essays on this novel by renowned scholars like Sudhendu Shekhar and Ludmila Volna. Sudhendu Shekhar wrote *Additional History: A Study of Shashi Tharoor's Great Indian Novel* (1989) which is a complete study of regression, myth and legends, indicating a departure from the original home. For him the novel not only reflects the modern-day worldview but also explores the life and soul of man. *The Indian Legacy: The Place of a New Myth* is a sincere effort by Ludmila Volna. The author focuses on *The Mahabharata* theme and finds purpose and meaning in the writing. For Tapan Ghosh, legends played an important role in the history of human civilization. Tapan made a detailed research on the nature and culture of Indian civilization presented by Tharoor and tried to provide answers to the problems of life. Tharoor rejects preconceived notions of the past because of his sense of people and actions foster a culture of pride and self-esteem. In India, legends have long existed as the combined knowledge of various ancient civilizations. They are also divided into a single individual in totality. Social reincarnation can also be seen in great epics such as *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*. Therefore, the myth and its interpretation as concepts in the history of Hinduism became a cry for abundance, tolerance and change.

Taj Mohammed has worked on History and Folk in Shashi Tharoor writings and received his Ph.D. from Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh in 2011. He has tried to discuss and analyze certain aspects of history, myth and legends which are recurring themes in many of Tharoor's works. Tharoor is a rich writer with history and legends. Readers can find many ancient myths and historical facts in his books. The first part of his academic essay contributed in the development of Indian English history, to explore the science of history and myth in Indian writing in English. Taj Mohammed explores the aspects of the history, myths and mythology of *The Great Indian Novel*.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) fascinatingly correlates the story of *The Mahabharata* and the history of Indian freedom struggle. The present research paper tries to explore 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 20th century India. The narrator of *The Great Indian Novel* is Ved Veyas and lord Ganesha is amanuensis who is described as Ganpati in the novel. From the beginning to the end of the novel Ved Vyasa dictates Ganpati the modern history of India by mythologizing the actual events. The novel begins with the story of Indian freedom struggle and the brutality of British Raj which caused havoc on India. Shashi Tharoor directly begins this epic novel by intermingling the story and characters of *The Mahabharat* with Indian modern history. The eighteenth parts of the novel are described as books and Tharoor keeps switching the story of contemporary history of India and the mythology of the epic *The Mahabharat*. A few instances are; 'The Duel with the Crown', 'The Twice-born Tale', 'The Midnight Parents', 'Passage Through India', 'A Raj Quartet' etc. The advent of Mahatma Gandhi is presented through the introduction of Ganga who is known as Bhishma in the epic. Priya Duryodhan represents Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Jawaharlal Nehru who is represented as Dhritrashtra and his younger brother Pandu is associated with Subhash Chandra Bose in the novel. Muhammad Ali Karna is the leader of Muslim league that demands for a separate Kingdom 'Karnistan' (Pakistan). Guru Drona of *The Mahabharat* is presented as Jaiprakash Dronna who becomes the great name after the JP movement against Prime Minister Indira Gandhi. Tharoor explains how Drona teaches five Pandawas and his son Ashwathaman. They are taught the Vedas; classical music, folk dance, rhetoric, oratory and Drona's own special skills. He teaches them nationalism. Arjun becomes his favourite as he is a very sharp learner. Arjun requests Drona to permit him to sleep at his feet so that he may learn all the time like Ashwathaman does. Arjun becomes a proficient bowman and learns all the skills perfectly. We all know the well known incident of Arjun concentration on his target. Tharoor also discusses the incident of Eklavya, though with a slight variation. In Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) Eklavya doesn't give the thumb of his right hand as demanded by Drona. He firmly rejects Drona's demand on the ground that he may not be able to write anything in the future. He has an old mother to serve so he cannot spoil his life.

Mohammed Ali Karna becomes a self-proclaimed leader of Indian Muslims. He is a big equipment of British divisive policies. He is very annoyed when he finds out that Muslims of Kaurva party (INC) have won more seats than that of his Muslim League. Mohammad Rafi belongs to Kaurva party and being a Muslim he poses big challenges for Mohammed Ali Karna who is a leader of Muslim League. When Kaurva party discusses on the issue of the coalition with Muslim League, Mohammad Rafi firmly speaks against any coalition with Muslim League. He is of the view that Kaurva party is the only true national party and we respect all groups and good Muslims where as Karna is a radical who talks about only one section. Gangaji declares that there will be no coalition. Gangaji becomes very angry when the British government announces war without consulting the elected representatives of Kaurva party. If they had discussed our leaders the Kaurva Party would have supported the British because even Gangaji didn't not like Fascism. But they have neglected the democracy and it becomes impossible for the Kaurva party to endorse the war. Kaurva party (INC) leaves the office of the British and announces not to co-operate with the British war effort. When Vidur is about to resign from the office Dhritrashtra tries to stop him but this time Vidur does not obey his brother and resignation letter is wired to Delhi. The participation in the war

on Indian behalf without the consent of Kaurva party's leaders is going to be fatal for the British Raj. The democratic leaders of Karva party (INC) get disillusioned and desire to start a big campaign against British Raj. This time Gangaji give a slogan that is simple clear and direct 'Quit India'. These are the two Magic words that ignite the public of India. This new slogan is on everyone face very soon. This movement can be seen everywhere including the walls of bus stands, railway stations, on notice boards, on theatre walls. "Little Newspaper Boys added it sotto voice to theirs sale cries; *The Times of India*. Quit India. *The Times of India*. Quit India" (GIN 222)

This movement last only 24 hours the British arrest the principal leaders of Kaurva party (INC), the movement is over before it really begins. In modern history of India Mahatma Gandhi announces 'Quit India Movement' on 8 August 1942 during Second World War. Amba on the other side is preparing herself to kill Ganga Datta. The character of Amba in the novel represents the historical character of Nathuram Godse who killed Mahatma Gandhi. Shikhandi is the mythological counterpart who becomes the cause of Ganga Datta's death in *The Mahabharata*. Amba goes to a doctor to change her gender and she becomes a man. With the end of the world war there begins another war in India. After the World War the British is no longer as strong as it used to be. Now the days of Empire are numbered. They are feeble in their empirical positions throughout the world. They start releasing the prisoners of 'Quit India Movement.' Elections take place Kaurva do well but not as before. Muslim League wins most of Muslim majority areas. At the last hours of the British Empire in India the British Raj strikes its great weapon of 'divide et imperia' for the last time and it destroys Indian unity forever. Mohammed Ali Karna wants karnistan (Pakistan). He announces 'direct action'. "Several thousand cadavers, burning vehicle, gutted homes, looted shops and rivulets of blood, everyone except the Mahaguru began thinking about the unthinkable: the division of the motherland." (GIN 211) Gangaji tries his best to stop the bloodshed. But he is no longer a charismatic personality. The foreign media is calling it a civil war. The British send a new viceroy in India for the proper transfer of power. His name is Viscount Drewpad. All possible efforts are made to accommodate Muslims in India but Mohammed Ali Karna does not agree at any point and sticks on his demand for a separate land Karanistan (Pakistan) for Muslims. It is heartbreaking for Gangaji. Gangaji departs from the meeting. Now the committee gets ready for the partition of India and Gangaji's era is over. India could not resolve this matter peacefully as the viceroy Drewpad was in great haste to go back. Tharoor holds Kaurva and the British responsible for the partition. Drewpad has never visited any part of our country and he drew a partition line in India. We can see the clear parallelism between the Name 'Drewpad' and the second form of verb 'drew' in his name. Yudhister is described as Morarji Desai and his connotative meaning is Truth. Amba as Shrikhandi (Godse) and Shishupal as Lal Bahadur Shastri. A large number of characters from *The Mahabharata* are delineated with a deft handling in modern historical point of view in the novel *The Great Indian novel*.

The Great Indian Novel retells the contemporary history of India starting with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi in national struggle against British Raj in India to the end of Indira Gandhi's tenure as prime minister of India. Tharoor engages his readers with the very interesting presentation of the characters of *The Mahabharata*. The characters in the novel ride in luxury cars instead of chariots and reside in multi storey buildings. Tharoor exposes the caste system, which is a long cherished tradition of Indian society, Vidur who is represented as Sardar Vallabh bhai Patel in the novel, is shown as a low caste man who was born from an attendant of the queen. Vidur must be married to the lady of his caste. The narrator Ved Vyas in *The Great Indian Novel* exposes the dogma of caste system. "As for you Vidur I have identified a young lady whose circumstances perfectly match yours." (28) Tharoor severely criticizes British policy of annexing Indian states in to British Empire with treachery. Ganga Datta will emancipate mother India from the bondage of British Empire. Bhishma's vow of celibacy finds its counterpart in Mahatma Gandhi's vow of celibacy. When Ganga Datta (Mahatma Gandhi) takes his vow of celibacy there was raining, "stray gust showered petals on to Ganga Datta's proud head." (14) Ganga Datta is a Satyagrahi at Motihari indigo farm for the salvation of the peasants who are oppressed by the planters of indigo. Ganga Datta fights against the injustice of administration to the Indigo farmers. He filed a case in the local court and wins with his determined spirit.

The book 'A Raj Quartet' deals with the most horrible incident of Jallianwala Bagh massacre as Bibigarh massacre in the novel. General Dyer is presented as Colonel Rudyard who orders to open fire at the unarmed crowd of men, women and children. 379 people died and 1,137 lay injured and many maimed. 1600 bullets were fired at the innocent people. The brutality of the British Raj was at its peak during the massacre at Bibigarh which explicitly has its counterpart in the history of Jallianwala Massacre. The figures of cruelty are just numbers provided by the then British media, actual toll might have not known to us. Most of the historian blamed General Dyer but here again in *The Great Indian Novel* Shashi Tharoor blames the tendency of blaming individual who caused havoc on humanity during British Raj. "And because he was not evil in himself he came to symbolize the evil of the system on whose behalf and in whose defense, he was acting." (101) Tharoor holds responsible the British Raj for the destitution, hunger and starvation of India. India was a glorious place before the Britishers came "they killed Indian artisan, they created Indian landless labourers, they exported our full employment and they invented our poverty." (118) Tharoor criticizes bitterly to those historians who have depicted "the British villain as supremely accomplished-the omniscient, omnipotent, manipulators of the destiny of India." (154) Tharoor called them nonsense who describes the incapable Britishers as omnipotent, in fact they were sinners who invaded India and at the gunpoint caused havoc on the innocent people of India. Tharoor mythologizes post- independence Indian politics and severely exposes and criticizes the then politicians. The great leaders like Gandhi and Nehru, Indira Gandhi, Mohammad Ali Jinnah receive disregard at the hand of Shashi Tharoor. Muhammad Ali Karna who pretends to be the religious protector of Muslim, in fact, his religious attitude is not that of a true Muslim. He does not follow religious tenants of Islam. He is given to drinking, enjoys life and joins Muslims only to lead them. Tharoor points out that Jinnah would never think of Muslim if he were offered leadership of India. The scene of August, 1947 is not celebrated by Ganga Datta. On the occasion of independence when everyone was celebrating in Delhi the Mahatma Ganga Datta was not cherishing the moment. Ganga Datta was very sad in the hours of partition. All through his life Ganga Datta preached fraternity which was murdered by both Hindu and Muslim who were killing each other like animals.

The Great Indian Novel mythologizes the annexation of Jammu and Kashmir in a very picturesque way. Jammu and Kashmir is described as Manimir in the novel. Vidur (Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel) goes to Manimir in order to annex it in the territory of independent India. The meeting of Vidur with the Maharaja of Manimir at midnight is described ridiculously. At the airport of Manimir Vidur first meets a colonel whose name is Colonel Bevkuf Jan who escorts Vidur to

the palace of Maharaja where the Maharaja was sleeping with a nubile satisfying his carnal desire. The Maharaja Vyabichar 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 Pakistan, 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 UNO, a decision that earned him the utter disdain of the people of India. Tharoor says in the novel, "partition paid a high prize for Dhritarashtra's Idealism." (368) Tharoor praises Vidur (Sardar Vallabh Bhai Patel) for the annexation of Manimir (Jammu and Kashmir) in India without any bloodshed or criticism but it was made controversial by Dhritrastra, by taking the issue to the UNO.

From the struggle against British rule Tharoor moves to the struggle against Indian government after independence. Jaiprakash Drona who was separated from Kaurva party (the then Congress Party) and makes public gathering against Dhritarashtra and Priya Duryodhani. "Drona was a post independence convert to the Mahaguru's dogma of non violence." (495) Jaiprakash Drona exclaims in public that the machineries and factories are being set up but no care is taken for peasants, the ministers of new India go to inaugurate steel factories or chemical laboratories but the Kauravas party is not doing what was promised before independence. "The honest peasant must be rewarded for the sweat on his brow! Land to the tiller" (389) After Dhritarashtra, Tharoor criticizes Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) is the possible threat to Yudhishthir, Bheem, Arjun, Nakul, and Sahadev who are the representative of Truth, Army, Law, Bureaucracy and Foreign services respectively. Duryodhan was the greatest threat to Dharma in *The Mahabharata*. As we know in the epic Duryodhan tries to burn Pandavas in the Lakshyagrah with Dropadi and mother Kunti. In the same way Tharoor describes that during Emergency period Priya Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) tries to kill, or euphuistically, tries to rule over democracy, truth, law, army, bureaucracy and Indian foreign services. 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) The mythical tropes in the novel describe Nakul and Sahadev as the two great poles of Indian democratic government. They are symbolized as the administrative and diplomatic services. Yudhister is the truth that works in public domain. Bheem is the protecting power of the boundaries of democracy. Morally and ethically unjustified marriage of Dropadi (Democracy of India) with five men in the epic is justified by the author in the novel. The democracy must be protected by Truth, Army, Law, Bureaucracy and Foreign Services all at once. The blending of Myth and history in the novel exposes and criticizes Dhritrastra (Jawaharlal Nehru) for not taking care of Indian Army after independence. Indian soldiers were ill equipped, no proper infrastructure, no proper weapons or even their uniform was not provided adequately. During India and Chakra (China) war Indian army was defeated very badly due to lack of mall handling of Indian Army by Dhritrasra who could make only great speeches about the fraternity of India and China. But Tharoor says in *The Great Indian Novel* that Chinese People Liberation Army "slant their jaundice eyes on India" (432) During the course of the novel Tharoor becomes extremely critical of Priya Duryodhani. He says, "She allowed no one to acquire enough power or influence over her to be able to hurt her one day." (456) During national emergency Priya Duryodhani caused havoc on the Democracy of India "so India had a new Queen empress". (456) The leaders of opposition under the leadership of Jai Prakash Drona were put behind the bars. Tharoor describes that Democracy is being suffocated "and Dropadi Mokrasia was diagnosed as asthmatic, breathe coming sometimes in short gasps." (507) Shashi Tharoor praises Priya Duryodhani only when she divides Pakistan in two. Pakistan is mythologized as Karnistan and Bangladesh is mythologized as Gelabi Desh in the novel. This was the only time when Priya Duryodhani is referred as Mother Goddess and Duryodhani Amma. Although Krishna played a vital role in the epic *The Mahabharata* but Tharoor deals with this character as simple as lord Krishna himself was. The author depicts Krishna as the secretary of Kaurva party in Gokaram, a fictional place in the novel. Krishna as secretary always guides Arjuna for choosing right way of Karma. At the end of the novel the democracy is restored as Priya Duryodhani revokes the Emergency rule and declares elections. All the leaders of opposition are released and a cool breeze of Democracy starts to blow. Shashi Tharoor has a unique way of mythologizing Indian politics and history. By using mythical tropes Tharoor writes fiction exactly as if he were writing an epic. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the general reader can easily and very precisely correlates each and every incident with what actually happened during Indian national struggle for freedom. Tharoor's characters recite mythological poetry during the course of the novel in a local language. Jeremy Hawthorn propagates the approach of fictionalizing real life characters and events. A reader can only recognize the characters or the incidents if he/she is acquainted with the real life story and the people.

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