

Reliving the Past: Yoking Myth and History in ShashiTharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract

Tharoor has made his debut in the literary scenario of Indian English fiction with the allegorical novel, titled *The Great Indian Novel* that attempts to transport the past of the epic days with its plurality of characters and events to the post independent India by subtly establishing a simulacrum between the characters and events of the past and the present. The greatest among all works of literature in size and intensity, *Mahabharata* still stands as a great reservoir for number of writers to draw inspiration from and to interpret according to the contemporaneity. Number of attempts has been made in different Indian languages as well as in foreign languages by writers of eminence to adapt stories from *Mahabharata* in order to surface their diverse perspectives and interpretations. It is quite obvious that Tharoor has found a good vehicle in *Mahabharata*, which can claim to include everything under the sun in its gamut, to make “an attempt to retell the political history of twentieth century India, through a fictional recasting of its events, episodes and characters” (Bookless 15). This paper attempts to establish how the characters of the epic are made to relive in the twentieth century India whereby an allegorical reading of the *Mahabharata* is brought into, with great precision and alacrity.

Keywords: Plurality, epic, reliving, allegory, myth, history.

I. Introduction

Tharoor has made his debut in the literary scenario of Indian English fiction with the allegorical novel, titled *The Great Indian Novel* that attempts to transport the epic days of the past with its plurality of characters and events to the twentieth century India by subtly establishing a simulacrum between the characters and events of the past and the present. Indian epic *Mahabharata* still stands as the greatest among all works of literature in size and intensity and has inspired a number of writers to experiment with it in diverse ways in different periods of history. It has even made the life in India stand still on Sundays, when it was serialised and telecasted on television. Tharoor has found a good vehicle in *Mahabharata*, in which he can incorporate anything under the sun, to make “an attempt to retell the political history of twentieth century India, through a fictional recasting of its events, episodes and characters” (Bookless 15).

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Tharoor's non-fiction work titled *Bookless in Baghdad*, functions as a forerunner to the creation of *The Great Indian Novel*. He uses the *Mahabharata* as a vehicle to affirm and enhance the diversity, pluralism, and openness of its kaleidoscopic culture. As far as the title of the novel is concerned, it is a literal translation of *Mahabharata*: *Maha* meaning "great" and *bharata* meaning "India" or the land of the legendary king Bharata on whose name this nation is founded. Together it functions as a literal translation of the epic.

Themes of the epics are usually elevated and revolve around war, adventure and heroism. The contemporaneity provided Tharoor an ideal platform to recreate *Mahabharata* which he felt was the right model to recreate modern context fictionally: "*The Great Indian Novel* is an attempt to retell the political history of modern India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the *Mahabharata*" (Shah 85). This complex mechanism of recreation focuses on the myth as a collective product of a society or community, historically evolved over long stretches of time, reflecting the collective experience of an identifiable group. It serves as a point of reference for the normative transactions of the concerned collectively combining the historical experience of the community with its imaginative comprehension of its aspirations. When the myth becomes part of a literary tradition then it takes on the form of an epic, but when a myth is used by a tradition as a reservoir of the memory of the unrecorded past then it turns into history.

Mahabharata is intrinsically woven into the everyday life situation of an Indian who finds at least one story that has a parallel or relevance to his/her life.: "*Mahabharata* is an unending source of metaphor for the rhetoric of our public debate" (*Bookless* 19). They identify themselves at random with Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhishma and Abhimanyu in social, political and personal contexts. The text of *Mahabharata* is unique in more than one way as it can be subjected to different readings and can produce as many texts as there are readers. Its contemporary relevance is largely determined by the people of the present as the epic has been subjected to number of adaptations, interpolations, reinterpretations and expurgations by a number of re-tellers, each seeking to reflect what he saw as relevant to his time. A work in stature like *Mahabharata* allows greater freedom for a writer to interpret and analyse either a character or a situation out of the original context. Tharoor has taken much liberty with the text of *Mahabharata* like any other story teller but has strictly conformed to its structure and design.

The *Mahabharata* is an epic tale describing the ancient historical struggle for the throne of Hastinapur by the two heirs of king Shantanu namely Pandavas and Kauravas. Tharoor attempts to narrate a similar struggle between groups and individuals closely related to each other for power, almost in line with the epic narrative by inventing one to one parallel between characters and events between both. The novel has eighteen chapters like the *Mahabharata* which has 18 books so is the battle of Kurukshetra that lasts for eighteen days. It can be perceived as an attempt not only to mirror the characters and events but to transport and implant the mythical context into the contemporary reality: an attempt to relive the past with all the characters and events transferred to the present. As Tharoor notes:

I used the great epic as the framework for a satirical reworking of the major Indian political events of this century, from the days of the British colonial rule to the struggle for freedom and the triumphs and disappointments of independence. In the process, I tried to reject some old assumptions, derived as much from the colonial view of India as from India's own uncritically accepted versions of our past. In my story I have set out to explore what has made

India and nearly unmade it, and to consider the nature of truth in life as in fiction, in tradition as in history. The choice of historical events to portray was easily made. (*Bookless* 23)

There are diverse ways in which the past can be documented: the narrative and the historic. The former presupposes a faithful rendering of all the past events to its minute detail whereas the latter is a way of representing only those events that are considered significant by the historian. History may not foreground all the events of the past with an equal emphasis but rather relegate certain stories to the background as irrelevant. The etymology of the word history seems to have derived from the Greek word *historia*, meaning enquiry or interrogation into the incidents, events and upheavals of the past. In India, the corresponding word for history is *itihasa* which is explained as *Iti ha asa* meaning “so it verily happened” (Pathak 234). Thus, in the Indian context, the word history carries two meanings: it refers both to what actually happened in the past and to the representation of the events of the past in the work of historians.

Yoking of the *Mahabharata* to the modern Indian history did impose certain restrictions on the writer as he was obliged to abandon novelistic convention and develop certain characters into walking metaphors. Characters like Draupati who is emblematic of Indian democracy that was disrobed during the state of emergency and the character of Jarasandha who was defeated by being torn to two pieces thrown in different directions like the breaking up of Pakistan in 1971, assume greater novelty in the present historical context. Tharoor feels that his attempt should match with the original in style, tone, form and scansion and tell the story of India with multiplicity, digressions and diversity by accommodating space for number of diverse voices. It is precisely why he steadily agrees with a critic who suggested that *The Great Indian Novel* speaks for an India of multiple realities and of multiple interpretations of reality: “Throughout my novel runs an acknowledgement for the multiplicity of truth, and a conscious evocation of the many truths that have helped give shape and substance to the idea of India” (*Bookless* 25). It is this variety that is integral to the notion of Indianness as far as Tharoor is concerned:

The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. Given the extraordinary mixture of ethnic groups, the profusion of mutually incomprehensible languages, the varieties of topography and climate, the diversity of the religious and cultural practises and the range of levels of economic development that India embraces, India is fundamentally a pluralist state: its pluralism emerges from its geography, is reflected in its history and is confirmed by its ethnography. Indian culture is therefore by definition a culture of multiplicities, a culture of differences. (*Bookless* 17)

The *Mahabharata* remains the longest epic poem ever written with its mighty 1.8 billion words and is ten times larger than the length of *Iliad* and *Odyssey* put together. The West still regards it as humanly impossible to create a work of such magnitude by a single individual with its enormous length and diversity. The *Mahabharata* has been instrumental in inspiring a number of writers in this continent, including Kalidasa and Bhasa, from time immemorial and Tharoor is not definitely the last with his allegorical satire reflecting the post-independent political India. What seems to be quite striking at this point is that while other writers attempted to recreate either a part of the story or the whole from a religious or devotional perspective, Tharoor has made a unique approach by recasting the entire gamut of characters, theme and setting into the contemporary reality: “I took heart from the conviction that irreverence in the

Indian tradition is not sacrilege: as the Mahabharata amply demonstrates, the epics themselves ascribe human qualities, imperfections, base motives and feet of clay even to the gods” (*Bookless* 23).

What Tharoor attempts is perhaps to substitute the contemporary characters in the mythical context and to make them relive the past in order to generate an altogether new vision of life. The characters in the epic were created more or less in lieu with the religious believes, the social and cultural contexts and on the notion of *Dharma*(appropriateness). It needs to be noted that being transmitted through the aural medium primarily, there is every possibility for any number of interpolations in the text of *Mahabharata*. Tharoor’s attempt at this point seems neither to interpolate a part of the text nor to recreate a particular character or setting by singling it out from the context. It is not even giving a new perspective to the original but to parody it so that the entire story can be transported and relived in the present. He selects the events diligently and portrays them with meticulous care, tailoring it to the needs of modern India about to cross the threshold of twenty-first century with all its ambivalences and ambiguities.

Tharoor is successful in establishing certain striking similarities between the characters in the epic on one hand with some of the contemporary political figures on the other. The characters of Gangaji (Gandhiji), Dhritarashtra (Nehru), Pandu (Subhash Chandra Bose), Vidhur (Sardar Patel) and Karna (Jinnah) are introduced quite early in the novel to establish the obvious political overtones. The chain of events that follow in quick succession that accelerate the momentum are the emergence of the party politics, struggle for freedom, upsetting the communal harmony, building of hatred in the wake of the partition, World War II and the fall of the Empire, partition of the country, the assassination of Gandhiji, Pakistan’s invasion of Kashmir, Indo-China war, Pakistan-Bangladesh confrontation, the problem of refugees, the lust for power and authority, rise of new heroes, public unrest, the fall of the Hyperion, press and army alertness, nationalisation of banks, the Emergency, formation and the fall of Janata Government and Indira Gandhi’s return to power. Apart from the characters and events certain historical incidents are also incorporated ingeniously into the gamut of the text, like Jalianwala Baugh massacre, Dandi march, Motihari Satyagraha and Chauri-Chora incident.

Thematically the novel deals with divisions and conflicts that constitute the history of India from its remote past to the present. However, it can be looked upon as an attempt to revive, re-appropriate and reinterpret history as a concept. It is an attempt to throw light into the acts of resistance and to recognise the invisible and the silenced voices submerged in the history. As Preeti. S. Pathak notes that Tharoor’s novel makes a bold and creative use of the mythic setting for an interpretation and the understanding of the historical process and uses this mode for a scathing commentary on the political episodes and personalities of modern India.

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