

EXPLORATION OF MYTHICAL AND HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVES IN SHASHI THAROOR'S 'THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL'

Dr. Sharad R. Vihirkar

Assistant Professor in English

R.S. Bidkar Art's Commerce & Science College

Hinganghat Dist. Wardha

Abstract:

Myth and history are the life-blood of contemporary literature. Myth is communicative of the total vision of the human condition, identity, destiny, inspiration and apprehensions. It is an aesthetic channel to explore and re-create the experience of the self in relation to the past. It's a mode of expression of the labyrinthine interaction of the self and the society. It provides a worldview that is both passionate and rationalistic so Indian aesthetics deals with the knowledge and the joy of existence. So myth and history are so combined that a unified pattern emerges with the creative artist creating new myths out of the ancient myths. This paper is an attempt to explore mythical and historical perspectives in Tharoor's the Great Indian Novel.

Key Words: *Myth, Epic, History, Socio-Political Situation, Characters, Incidents.*

Shashi Tharoor is a conscious creative *writer* who has blended his art with myth and history of his time. 'The Great Indian Novel' is perhaps the finest socio-political satirical novel which interprets The Mahabharata as India's contemporary history of 20th century. Many of the characters, incidents and issues are based on people and events described in the great epic the Mahabharata. The title of the novel is not from the author's estimate of its contents but in deference to its primary source of inspiration the ancient epic'. It is a lengthy novel in the form an epic. An invisible but omnipresent and participating narrator Ved Vyas(V.V.) in the first person tells the story following the epic device. There is a mute scribe in the person of Ganapathi, South Indian who never makes any verbal comment to the narrative. Thus the framework of the oral narrative is established. M. K. Chaudhury remarks: - "...Tharoor's Ved Vyas in 'The Great Indian Novel narrates to Ganapathi, his scriptwriter, in pretentious, jocular, garrulous and perky manner the story of modern India. He not only transforms the ancient myth into pre-independence and post-independence politics but also transforms the

contemporary political history into a myth of some kind or other"¹ (Chaudhury.1994:118).

Every character in the Indian freedom struggle and post-independence political arena from Mahatma Gandhi, Jinnah, and Lord Mountbatten to Indira Gandhi, and Morarji Desai is cleverly represented. Their historic actions and interactions are made to conform to the novel's well-known episodes. Meenakshi Sharma writes: - '...Tharoor's "fictional recasting "of the epic (Myth 30) sets up a perspective which connects not only its narrative but also the underlying notions of history, fiction, and narrativisation, with ancient and resilient Indian traditions. It is through such a return to indigenous; traditions that the novel poses a significant post-colonial challenge to the dominant Western paradigms of narrative in fiction and historiography. Its narrative strategy allows Tharoor to suggest, in indigenous cultural traditions and myths, an alternative to the Western paradigm of narrative with a beginning, middle and end"² (Sharma,1999:135-6).

Tharoor has been made the frequent and effective use of history and legend, myth and memory in his novel. The myth is used to portray the immediate marital friction. The Indian consciousness and creative sensibility are largely exercised by the mutability of all creation. He use the digressional method of storytelling so effectively employed. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book *The Twice Born Fiction* avers 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"³ (Meenakshi Mukherjee, 1971:31).

The novel is divided into eighteen chapters, reminding one of the eighteen parvas of the Mahabharata. India is a great country indeed and applying the same adjective to this story. Rao remarks:...'When the source is a work like the Mahabharata or the Ramayana, which have a

special anchoring in the collective ideology and consciousness of a community or a nation, then the safest strategy would be the literalist, - this for the very obvious reason that the demands and interests invoked by modern fiction are radically different from those presupposed by an ancient epic form, - it liberates the novelist from obligations to the original source and difficult because it demands considerable creative energy from the novelist⁷⁴ (Rao.1988:120).

At the beginning, Tharoor gives us a clear family tree of individuals and their intricate relationships with one another in the epic. The persons, places, and events of the epic are parodied. The foremost important character and the narrator of the story is Ved Vyas (V. V.) who is born out of sage Parashar and the fish scented maiden, Satyavati. In the parody he may be equated to Rajagopalachari, the first Governor General of Independent India. The next character is Bhishma or Ganga Datta. He is 'the man in charge of Hastinapur' (p.30) and is very closely suggesting Gandhiji. The blind Dhritarashtra who is parodied as Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose as 'Pandu the pale' (p.42). The person described as Vidur Dharmaputra is none other than Sardar Patel the 'Iron Man of India' and the bold, sensible and rational leader of the masses.

Shashi Tharoor transcripts the hundred Kauravas as one girl called Priya Duryodhani, who is none other than Indira Gandhi, and attributes the vices of all the Kauravas to her. The emergence of Karna is likened to that of Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Dronacharya is Jayprakash Narayan. Of the five Pandavas, we find a close resemblance of only Yudhishthira to Morarji Desai, the unflinching follower of dharma to his last breath. The other brothers can be said to be...allegorical representations of India's major religions, or as India's diverse regional cultures, or as the five arms of government-jurisprudence defense, media, external, and national affairs⁵ (Parmeshwaran, 1975: 435)

There are some other characters cleverly presented. Lord Mountbatten is portrayed as Viscount Drewpad. Draupadi D. Mokras is the child born of the marriage between Britain's concept of democracy and the Indian system of administration. There is no distinct alter ego of Krishna in the novel, but he may stand for a person who safeguards the interests of the nation, and one whose mental agility and foresight are unparalleled- '...Krishna is evidently a mysterious, eccentric figure to the novelist, who appears as Dr. Krishnan Parthasarathy, a local party secretary,

whose grant of an unending sari to Draupadi proves to be a phenomenon too much for the novelist's flair for fabricating anything⁶ (Tripathi.1994:107). Amba or Shikhandi is portrayed as Nathuram Godse, the assassin of Gandhi. Lal Bahadur Shastri portrayed as Shishu Pal whose tenure as Prime Minister is cut short by a conspiracy. Kunti is the astounding deviation from the mainstream ethic of ancient India. She begets five children with the permission of her husband from sources other than him. Madri is portrayed as Captain, the wife of Subhash Chandra Bose, assisting him in his air warfare. The other principal characters of the Mahabharata are convinced as the major institutions of India-Bhima as the army, Arjuna as the press, Draupadi as democracy.

The places in the story too, are given parodic names, which are charged with political significance. The places with altered names are Jalianwala Bagh as Bibigharh Gardens, Kashmir as Marmir, Srinagar as Devpur, Jammu as Marmu, China as Charka, Pakistan as Karnistan, Goa as Comea and Bangladesh as Gelabin Desh etc. The Historic Dandi March is called the 'Mango March' Tharoor allegorizes the colonizer-colonized relationship through parodying certain crucial incidents in the history of the British rule in India is the Jalianwala Bagh massacre, renamed the Bibigharh massacre. General Dyer is given the name Rudyard, which is an undisguised reference to Rudyard Kipling, the imperialist writer. Tharoor highlights the brutality of the colonial regime. After shooting thousands of peaceful agitators, the soldiers give Colonel Rudyard the report of their assignment. The cold blooded murderer gratifies himself that out of 1600 bullets, only 84 bullets were wasted and it was not unreasonably bad, owing to the wide area of the park.

The slogan of 'Quit India' echoes nationwide and sporadic violence erupts as a result of the high-handedness of the colonizers. Lord Mountbatten (Viscount Drewpad) takes charge as the Governor General of India at a time when the political situation is like a simmering volcano, ready to erupt at any moment. The country is rife with agitations and protests like direct action day and the demand for Pakistan. He proposes to withdraw from India on the 15th of August, 1947. The choice of date is governed by an absurd consideration, it is the day of his wedding anniversary...

In the novel Gandhiji organizes the Dandi March (Mango March) to gain publicity. He tries to attract attention by his capricious acts. In his view Gandhi is not a saint with his head in the clouds,

but a master tactician with his feet on the ground. He suspends the agitation as violence erupts unexpectedly, as he says; his people have not understood him. Soon after freedom, he was ill and almost near his death. At such times Godse, the modern incarnation of Shikhandi of the epic, appears on the scene to take revenge. He fires three bullets into Gandhiji's frail body and takes his life. He may be considered a personification of the consequences of Gandhi's faulty decision taken on certain occasions.

The death of Lal Bahadur Shastri is followed by the Emergency of Indira Gandhi (Priya Duryodhani) on the scene, and her machinations to get rid of her Pandavas cousins, especially Bhim, her most powerful opponent right from her childhood. Tharoor remarks that- 'Priya Duryodhani acted only according to the dictates of her own conscienceless mind' (p.15). She takes up the controls of Indian Democracy. Morarji Desai (Yudhistir) who is a rigid adherent to the principles of democracy and majority will insist on a strong leadership. She created the post of Deputy Prime Minister and offered it to Desai. But soon he resigns, unable to stand the humiliation and callousness meted out by her. To the ambitious Priya Duryodhani, Draupadi Mokras (Democracy) becomes a thorn in the flesh and she wants to get rid of her by getting her married. The author exposes how Indira Gandhi misuses power and starts criminalizing the press, the judiciary and the party. He considers the period of Emergency as one of the most veritable satanic rule in the history of India.

Thus, Tharoor contextualize the history of India, actual people and ethics through the 'mythic charge'. He scrutinized the regime from Nehru to Indira Gandhi. He focused on power-politics, personality clashes, institutional structure, individual and social dharma, traditions and shortcomings. He traced the evolution of India's history right from the epic times up to the last decade. With the death of this political giant, India's politics is poised for a sea change.

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