

Exploring the Interplay between Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a captivating work of fiction that explores the mythology and history of India's freedom struggle. Drawing upon the epic story of the *Mahabharata*, and weaving in characters and events from the twentieth century, Tharoor retells the tale to illustrate the colonial and postcolonial experience of India. Characters from Indian history are reimagined in the context of the mythical narrative, creating an engaging narrative that tells the story of modern India. The novel seeks to create a new historical perspective, reinterpreting myth and history to reconstruct a past reality, and to give modern relevance to India's great legends and values. This research paper presents a new interpretation of myth and history as a means of reconstructing the past. It seeks to contribute to modern sensibilities about the great legends of our past and to assess their value. By exploring the relationship between myth and history, it is hoped that a more accurate understanding of the past will be achieved. Additionally, this research paper hopes to shed light on how myths can be used to inform future generations about the accomplishments of our ancestors. This research delves into the concept of creating a nation anew, with a foundation of logical thought and a reshaped political landscape featuring revised political ideologies. This paper endeavors to use fiction as a lens through which to examine the multifaceted nature of constructing a nation.

Keywords: Myth, History, Colonialism, Post colonialism, Historiography.

Introduction:

The Great Indian Novel, written by Shashi Tharoor, explores the allegorical connections between contemporary Indian history and the mythical world of *the Mahabharata*, a great Indian epic poem. The novel delves into the intersection of these two realms, providing a unique and fascinating perspective on both. In Tharoor's own words, his writing "my fiction seeks to reclaim [India's] heritage for itself, to tell in an Indian voice, a story of India."¹ This research paper deconstructs colonial historiography and reclaims India's national history, with the goal of rewriting the Western interpretation of Indian history and presenting the history of 20th century India from a postcolonial perspective. Using real events and characters from 20th century Indian socio-political philosophy, the novel attempts to construct a history of colonial and postcolonial India. Mythological characters are reinterpreted as figures from Indian history, and the mythological story of the epic is recast as the history of India.

In India, the lines between history and myth are often blurred and intertwined, with ancient epics serving as a prime example of this cultural tradition. This blending of the two can be seen as recently as the early nineteenth century in Bengali histories of India, where myth, history, and the contemporary are all considered part of the same chronological sequence, with no distinction made between them. As Partha Chatterjee notes, "Myth, history, and the contemporary – all become part of the same chronological sequence; one is not distinguished from another; the passage from one to another, consequently, is entirely unproblematic"² But in the West, as Peter Hechs argues, "myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation. [...] Since the Greeks, logos (word as demonstrable truth) has been opposed to mythos (word as authoritative pronouncement). [...] The general trend of post-Enlightenment historiography has been the eradication of myth from the record of "what really happened."³

The blending of myth and history is a longstanding tradition in India, one that can be seen in both oral tradition and literature. In the twentieth century, this tradition is alive and can be seen in *The Great*

Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor. In the novel, two different times, mythical and historical, operate simultaneously. The narrator of the novel, V.V., begins the story by recounting the genealogy of the characters, which is based in myth and does not align with historical time. This serves to establish the mythical foundations of the story, setting the stage for the events to come. However, once this genealogy has been established and the actual story begins, mythical time gives way to historical time. From this point on, the novel follows a linear progression through history, with events unfolding in a way that is grounded in historical reality. This transition from mythical time to historical time serves to highlight the ways in which myth and history are intertwined, with each informing and shaping the other.

The Great Indian Novel offers a powerful counter-(hi)story of India and serves as an effective way of questioning Europe's hegemony in prose writing, history, and novels, thanks to its use of metafictional devices, oral narrative, and the basic structure of myth, which is associated with the past, tradition, religious beliefs, mysticism, and ahistoricity/stasis, in contrast to the Western concept of realism, which represents "rationalism, materialism, industrialism, technological innovation."⁴ Positivist historiography often divides history and myth into distinct categories, but *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor challenges this tradition by incorporating popular Indian myths into its representation of history. Through the use of historiographical metafiction, Tharoor's novel highlights the act of recording and narrativizing history in order to question the conventions of positivist historiography and challenge this model of writing history. In contrast, fictive historical realism follows the same conventions as Western-style (positivist) historiography, adhering to a more traditional and factual approach to writing about the past. Tharoor's novel offers a unique and thought-provoking perspective on the way history is written and understood in the Indian context, challenging the knowledge produced by positivist historiography. According to Hutcheon, post-modern techniques commonly used in historiography and fiction are employed by V.V. in their narration of *The Great Indian Novel* in order to blend myth and history and challenge the conventions of positivist

historiography:

"there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation."⁵

The narrator, V.V., is clearly identified from the start of *The Great Indian Novel*, and the act of narration itself becomes part of the story being told. V.V. addresses his listener and, through them, the reading audience directly while dictating to a scribe, creating an effect of defamiliarization. The listeners/readers are not immersed in a seemingly factual and objective account of twentieth-century Indian history, but rather are listening to/reading an account that makes them aware of the act of narration in progress. This is in contrast to the ostensibly objective Western 19th and 20th century historiographical narration, which, according to Emile Benveniste, "truly there is no longer a 'narrator.' The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves."⁶ Rather than following Western historiography conventions, Tharoor's V.V. tells a subjective story of twentieth-century Indian history based on his own experiences.

Historical writing does not directly reflect the reality of the past since it is mediated via literature. Because it is a product of ideology and is positioned in relation to culture, literature plays an important role in the articulation of social practices. Anusha U. R. stated in her article "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."⁷ In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor masterfully unveils the complexities of historical consciousness through his representation of pivotal events such as the partition and the emergency. The partition is not just depicted as a historical event but serves as a metaphor for the fragmented and subjective nature of reconstructing the past. The truth of the past can only be comprehended by delving into the literary evidence of the present. Through imaginative retelling and recasting of Indian history and mythology in a culturally hybrid environment, Tharoor innovatively employs literary techniques, setting a new standard for Indian English

writing, and inspiring many writers to follow in his footsteps. His approach gives birth to multiple perspectives, different settings and diverse literary works.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor recasts Indian history as a mythical tale, depicting democracy as a 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".⁸ Through this approach, the novel challenges the modern myths of Indian independence and the narrative of democracy. Tharoor explores how the ancient epic can be used as a metaphor for the political system of modern India, highlighting how the process of history making is not separate from literature making. By combining the creativity of fiction with factual information, Tharoor identifies historical figures like Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah with their mythological counterparts, creating a rich tapestry of open-ended narratives that encourages readers to reinterpret and rethink the history and meaning of India. Through the use of metaphor, Tharoor's open-ended narrative emphasizes the endless possibilities of meaning in the discourse of history.

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is a reinterpretation of the epic Mahabharata as a commentary on India's political history, specifically the freedom struggle and partition. The novel combines fiction and non-fiction, and also uses the epic as primary source of inspiration. 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 perhaps cynical modern sensibility upon the great legends of the past, but equally was able to cast some of the values that passed onto the experiences of the more recent present."⁹

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* masterfully intertwines the epic Mahabharata with modern history, both in terms of organization and narrative. The novel's eighteen "books" mirror the eighteen days of war between the Pandavas and Kauravas in the original epic. The novel begins with "The Twice-Born Tale," in which the narrator, Ved Vyas, declares his intention to transcribe "The Song of Modern India" in his own words, just as Vyasa dictated the Mahabharata to Ganesh. Through this technique, the novel portrays the narrative of the battle for independence of Hastinapur under the leadership of Mahaguru Gangaji (Mahatma Gandhi), such as his famous Salt March, and the birth of Indian democracy with characters like a blind nationalist (Jawaharlal Nehru), a British Vicereine (Lady Mountbatten), Karna (Md. Ali Jinnah), Pandu the Pale (Subhas Chandra Bose) and Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi). Through this narrative, Tharoor's novel offers a unique and thought-provoking perspective on the way history is written and understood in the Indian context.

Through the character of Ganga Datta, also known as Gangaji, Tharoor draws a parallel between Bhishma of the Mahabharata and Gandhi of the Indian freedom struggle. Both characters are depicted as equally principled and selfless, who willingly gave up power and administration for the good of the nation. Through the character of Gangaji, Tharoor presents a nuanced and compelling portrayal of the leaders and followers of the Indian freedom struggle, highlighting their sacrifices, struggles and triumphs in the quest for independence.

In the Mahabharata, Dhritrashtra and Pandu had the right to the throne of Hastinapur after Bhishma, whereas in Indian political history, Nehru and Subhas were the only candidates left to lead the Indian polity after Gandhi. The characters of Dhritrashtra and Pandu are allegorically linked to Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose, respectively. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that Gangaji, who represents Gandhi in the novel, favors Dhritrashtra over Pandu. This favoritism allows Dhritrashtra to secure a prominent role in the country's political landscape, while Pandu bears the consequences of Gangaji's apathy towards him. This parallel between Gangaji's support for Dhritrashtra in the novel and Bhishma's support for Dhritrashtra and his Kaurava sons in the Mahabharata, despite their moral shortcomings, highlights Gandhi's alleged bias towards Nehru.

Through *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor showcases how the desire for power, which led to the war of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata, also plays a crucial role in the political landscape of pre and post-partition India. He highlights this through the character of Karna, representing Jinnah, who, despite being from the same clan, is denied his rightful place due to his circumstances of birth. But, Karna fiercely fights for his rights and ultimately achieves the creation of a new nation, known as Karnistan, representing

Pakistan. The partition of India on August 14, 1947, is a significant event that shaped the destiny of both nations.

He creates a tapestry of characters that are still relevant today, starting with the iconic figure of Gangaji (Gandhi) and culminating with the rise of Priya Duryodhani, symbolizing the return of powerful figures in India's political landscape 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." (42) Tharoor crafted the character of Gangaji, a powerful and revered leader, who is at the forefront of the fight for India's independence. He represents the ideals of truth, non-violence and peaceful resistance. However, the novel also illustrates how his actions and decisions ultimately led to the divisive partition of India. Through the character of Gangaji, Tharoor suggests that while Gandhi's ideas and principles were noble, his actions and decisions may have contributed to the alienation of political leaders like Karna from the Kaurava party, ultimately leading to the partition of India. 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)

Conclusion:

To conclude, in his debut novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, Shashi Tharoor challenges traditional notions of historiography by interweaving elements of Indian mythology and popular culture into his representation of India's political history. Through his use of historiographical metafiction, Tharoor highlights the act of recording and narrativizing history, questioning the conventions of positivist historiography and problematizing the idea of a singular, objective truth. The novel serves as a commentary on the politics of India and its political leaders, as well as on the role of literature in shaping societal narratives. Tharoor uses literary techniques, such as allegory, symbolism, and characterization to bring out the moral and ethical ambiguities of the main characters, in an attempt to explain the complexities of history and how it shapes the present. Through this novel, Tharoor has taken a fresh approach in addressing the historical events of India by interweaving the epic of Mahabharata and has opened a new vista of history rewriting in Indian English literature. Through his novel *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor masterfully explores the complex relationship between history, mythology and politics in the Indian context. He skillfully intertwines elements of the epic Mahabharata with real-life historical events and figures to create a thought-provoking narrative that highlights the shortcomings and inconsistencies of India's leaders and the society as a whole. He presents Gangaji, an allegory of Mahatma Gandhi as a pious and selfless leader, but also as a figure whose actions and decisions ultimately led to the partition of India. He portrays how the history can be re-imagined, re-interpreted and reshaped through the literary device, creating an open-ended narrative that raises important questions about the nature of history, truth and power.

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