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Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*: Reading through Postcolonial and Postmodernist Lenses

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Abstract

The grand epic of Vyasa which is almost 2000 years old is not a literary masterpiece tucked away in air conditioned museums or libraries, but its characters and events speak to us with a contemporary resonance. The evidence of the popularity of this text is in the form of retellings in the form of books, theatre adaptations and tele-serials all across the world. This research is based upon Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), one of such retellings and a fictional work that takes the story of this epic; and recasts and resets it in the context of twentieth century India. Postmodernity has been an important element in twentieth century fiction, and thus this research closely looks at the elements of meta-fiction, fluidity, parody, intertextuality present in this novel which make it a postmodern work. The 20th century was also marked by mass decolonisation of many countries, and the postcolonial literature produced by the former colonies is interesting as well as engaging. The postcolonial writings are an act of reclaiming the lost culture and also the act of 'the empires writing back'. Tharoor's novel, like Rushdie's masterpiece, is yet another magnum opus which shows the distinctiveness of postcolonial literature.

Keywords: Intertextuality, *Mahabharata,* Postmodernism, Retelling, Metafiction, Historiography

Introduction

Over the years the *Mahabharata* has had so many accretions in the form of constant retellings and thus there is practically no subject which it does not cover. The surprising

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and amazing thing about this great work is that its characters and personages still march triumphantly in our minds. They are very much alive and one can visualise them everywhere. The myths and legends of *Mahabharata* constantly inspire our imagination and its episodes and events speak to us with a contemporary resonance. Such echo is very rare in any work of art which was created thousands of years back. In the form of *Mahabharata*, our past has prolonged itself into the present. This text has been the subject of adaptation, interpolation and reinterpretation across all societies and generations, and these overflow with myths and legends of all sorts, didactic tales, divine interventions, stories teaching moral and existential lessons and above all the innumerable digressions extending from law to lechery, politics to philosophy, and shrewd diplomacy to dark conspiracies.

Very simply put, the *Mahabharata* is what we make of it and this is one of the reasons for the universality and eternality of this text. The relevance of this epic hence would be the relevance we want to see in it. Its contemporary retellings have been in the form of plays which have been adapted at the national and international level, poetry anthologies by renowned writers in the national as well as regional languages, and also satirical adaptations like Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*. All these retellings confirm the *Mahabharata's* traditional status as the repository of the national myth. This includes all the stories, the ideas, the social and political customs and practices, the prescriptions and values which a particular re-teller considers significant to his version in reiterating this great work, and thus in doing so the re-teller and his audience are recalling the shaping of their own cultural identity. Devdutt Pattanaik who has authored *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* which was published in 2010 mentions that,

> This book is yet another retelling of the great epic. Inspired by both Sanskrit classic as well as its regional and folk variants … shaped by my own prejudices as well as the demands of the modern reader, restructured for the sake of coherence and brevity. (xv)

At times this identity asserting quality of the *Mahabharata* becomes problematic because of its understanding perceived by different people. *The Mahabharata* is purely a secular epic; its characters are very human and are capable of greatness and debasement like ordinary people. Hence, there is nothing restrictive or self limiting about the Indian identity it reasserts: it is vast, eclectic and flexible, and contains multitudes of layers within it.

About the Novel

The work, *The Great Indian Novel*, is a satirical fictional work and it takes the story of *Mahabharata* which has been recast and reset in the context of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the political atmosphere of first three decades of post independent India. Thus the figures from the freedom movement and other big wigs of the post independent era have been transformed and refashioned into the characters of the great epic. According to Iyer, "The deep rooted connect between Indian society and mythology can be seen during India's freedom movement. From influencing leaders like Gandhi and Tilak to providing themes for artists with nationalist visions, mythology became the guiding force of history."(Iyer 27) Thus the history of India in the twentieth century has been retold through these characters and the novel also traverses the ups and downs, the complexities, the power dynamics and also the silent strategies taken to result in the final outcome of today. The book also presents the view of the murky colonial Raj and how coloniality existed even after the British left. The writer has presented the colonists as caricatures, especially those of which the English have been really proud of. Speaking of the *Mahabharata*, it is an epic tale which describes the historical dynastic struggle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the two groups- the Pandavas and the Kauravas who are the two branches of the heir, King Shantanu. Tharoor in retelling the epic has kept certain names as the epic has, while some he anglicises or deforms them. Thus, Bhisma becomes Ganga Datta, Dhritrashtra, Pandu are the same, while Karna becomes Mohammad Ali Karna, King Drupad becomes Lord Drewpad and so on. Even the places have been changed- Bengal is Gelabin, Kashmir is Manimir, Lahore is Laslut, Goa is Comea and so on. The five Pandavas become the five pillars of independent India; righteous Yudhisthir the judiciary and idea of justice, Arjun the free press and the concept of liberty, Bhim represents the army, and Nakul and Sahadev the administrative and foreign services of independent India. Their shared wife is Draupadi Mokrasi who is emblematic of Indian democracy, and her attempted disrobing a symbol of disrobing democracy which has been a blot in the history of this country. Even the title, *The Great Indian Novel* is an allusion to the long standing idea of the "Great American Novel" and is also a pun, roughly translating *Mahabharata* (the Great Bharat).

According to the French dramatist Jean Claude Carriere, *The Mahabharata* is an immense poem which flows with the majesty of a great river and carries an inexhaustible richness. It defies all structural, thematic, historical or psychological analysis. Throughout the book we find layers of ramifications, sometimes

contradictory, and these follow up one after the other – all of them being interwoven without losing the central theme. This very fluid nature of the book has resulted in thousands of retellings and millions of discourses. When we talk of Tharoor's novel, we find this fluid nature of the text which is embedded within and makes it a post modern work. Every freedom fighter of repute is juxtaposed with a figure from *Mahabharata* and hence there is a liminal duality that is characteristic of Post-modern fiction. Ganga Datt is a thinly disguised version of Gandhiji and the patriarch of the movement and is equal to Bhishma Pitamah, the grand patriarch in the epic *Mahabharata*. The blind Dhritarashtra becomes Nehru – a tongue in cheek comment on his myopic socialist politics while Vidura represents Patel – the stern nationalist; the fiery Pandu represents Subhash Chandra Bose – the man who did not have faith on the Indian National Congress. Karna is an unfaithful representation of Mohmmad Ali Jinnah. The surprising twist is however Duryodhana who undergoes a gender change as Duryodhani and represents Indira Gandhi. Thus, historic representation can never always be believed because normative history is based upon facts. Here Duryodhana has been appropriated with the mercurial Indian Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi, who demolished the democratic principles of justice, sovereignty, equality, representation and freedom.

Defining a Postmodern Work

Before delving further, it is very important that the qualities of a post modern work are stated here. Dr. Mary Klages mentions,

> Postmodernism, like modernism, follows most of these same ideas, rejecting boundaries between high and low forms of art, rejecting rigid genre distinctions, emphasizing pastiche, parody, bricolage, irony, and playfulness. Postmodern art (and thought) favours reflexivity and self-consciousness, fragmentation and discontinuity (especially in narrative structures), ambiguity, simultaneity, and an emphasis on the de structured, de centered, dehumanized subject.

Any postmodern work of art always maintains a fine balance between appropriation and the room for individual agency which makes the work charming and also differentiates it from others. The blending of theory and experience is typical of any post modernist work and it resists any kind of homogeneous fixity. This novel has all the ingredients of a postmodern novel, and the best example is dark humour and bitter satire camouflaged through parody upon which the author relies and traces the genesis of postcolonial India through the reworking of the epic *Mahabharata*.

The other prominent features are – circular narration, self-reflexive narrator and dismantling of coherence.

Ved Vyas is the narrator in this novel, referred to as VV, and this gives a touch of familiarity and resemblance to the original epic, at the same time it also accords a touch of authenticity. Ved Vyas as a narrator also distances himself from the events – he is unreliable because of the self-reflexivity of the narrator. He is conscious of the role of time and memory in obviating the narrative, supplying it with details which are not constant with the main epic. This doubling of narratives is interesting from the hermeneutical point of view too as it raises the questions of doubling or authorial authenticity since the transference of meaning is called into question and thereby it results in an unreliable, fractured text. This is an important manifestation of the post-modernist tendency which views the narrative from a position of distance and disconnect.

The appropriation of the text from scriptures also conforms to the tendency of post-modernist writers to rely on intertextuality. Postmodernism always acknowledges previous literary works, and interextuality is the medium through which this dependence is projected. This intertextuality also comments on the living and working conditions of the 20th century society, creating an inclusive literature which has the components of previous as well as contemporary literature. Throughout the novel, Tharoor refers to various other famous works on India such as E. M. Forster, Rudyard Kipling and Paul Scott. He takes the story of the *Mahabharata* and blends it with Indian history, going back three generations. The succinct lucidity of detail that corresponds well with sharply etched characters, sanctions the novel a unique post-modern sensibility that stands at par with the literary milestones of the movement.

> Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self–consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. (Waugh 2)

Some of the most popular Indian English novels of the time fall into the classification of "Historiographic metafiction," the word coined by the theoretician Linda Hutcheon. She also defines this term to many known and popular novels which are both deeply self-reflexive and yet ironically lay claim to historical characters and events (Hutcheon 2003: 5). Hutcheon states that historiographic metafiction disproves the methods of

distinguishing between fiction and historical facts which are natural or fall under the umbrella of common sense. This counters the idea that only history has a claim to reality, both by challenging the basis of that argument in historiography and also by stating that both history and fictions are only human constructs which exist in the form of structures and discourses. (Hutcheon 2003: 93) Historiographic metafiction often poses concerns about positivist and fictional realist historiographic-writing, and makes concerted attempts to simplify and even problematize the recording process. Metafiction often uses experimental and unconventional techniques by rejecting traditional plots, subverting conventions to turn 'fact' into a highly suspicious idea by exaggerating and revealing the foundations of their instability and by showing reflexivity that helps the reader to know the processes by whom he reads the world as texts. (Waugh 5) Postmodernist metafictions have the characteristics of paradox, self-reflexivity, open endedness, intertextuality, provisionality, subjectivity, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and irony. *The Great Indian Novel* qualifies suitably in all these parameters and is truly an example of 'Historiographic metafiction'. The characters of the novel are sufficiently true to the actual historical phenomenon to justify the term. It only remains to see whether or not the events described are in consonance with the actual historical events.

The writer uses the technique of pastiche – a literary technique adopted by many post-modern authors which involves combining, interposing or pasting elements of previous genres and styles of literature to create a new narrative voice or to comment upon the style of contemporary writers. If we look at the structure of the novel, we find that the novel is narrated in eighteen chapters that equal the eighteen books of *Mahabharata*. This also alludes to the actual war of *Mahabharata* which occurs at Kurukshetra over eighteen days. The chapters are each titled after a well-known specimen of Indian scholarship ranging from *Midnight's Children* by Rushdie reworked as Midnight's Parents to Foster's *Passage to India* baptized here as Passages through India. This novel celebrates fragmentation of truth, multiplicity, doubt and angst.

Ved Vyas the narrator, wondrously wakes up from his dream in today's India of computers and corruptions, a land of politicians, bureaucrats and corporate with handbags and plastic briefcases. The India of twenty first century is overwhelmed with uncertainties and is muddling chaotically through the passage of time. Ved Vyas dreams again so as to end the story and enable Tharoor with his zero degree technique, where the last line of the novel is also the beginning of the novel, and interestingly the writer uses it consciously.

Tharoor's creativity lies in the fact that the ancient epic in many ways replays the political system of modern India. Thus the process of making history is not separate from creating fiction. In doing so, Tharoor combines his scholarly abilities to dig factual information, identify the figures of Gandhi, Nehru; adds his creative fictional flavour and links them with their mythological counterparts. He juxtaposes the two narratives to foreground history as highly transformative discourse ever open to reinterpretation. Tharoor's open ended narrative re-opens the narratives of the fiction and history and the metaphorical description affirms the endless possibilities of meanings, a characteristic which is very true of the poststructuralist movement. *The Great Indian Novel* is a reconstructed text blending myth and history. Tharoor's mockery to the national leaders is a part of his new narrative technique and evolution of new political archetype, and many great leaders of the national movement have received total disregard at the hands of the author.

Re-contextualising Mythology in Contemporary Scene

The Indian novelist today has consciously used myth for enhancing the effect of a contemporary situation, a technique which he has emulated from the west but very effectively used it and also naturalised it to the Indian soil. The epics provide a common background for a shared human experience, and this permeates the collective unconscious of the whole nation. In this novel, Tharoor reorganizes the story of the developing Indian democracy as struggle between groups and individuals, closely associated by their personal and political histories. Thus Tharoor has achieved two ambitious projects in one stroke, recreating the epic Indian tale as well as narrating the history of India in the twentieth century which includes part of the freedom struggle and also three decades after independence. The retelling of the same story with improvised additions and deletions offers an air of romance and freshness to it. He uses the digressional method of storytelling as used in the great epics very effectively and by making a conscious use of mythical events and situations to enhancing the effect of the contemporary scenario.

In this novel the narrator has a direct role into the work which he narrates. Since the narrator tells the story of his own family and relates it with the historical events and backgrounds, it can be said as meta-fictional work. The novel also illustrates the author's involvement with the readers through his interaction with them, a unique postmodern technique of writing. The text opposes objectivity, a practice which had been part of the traditional method of writing. The author has made a clear blend of fact and fiction. So the distinction between fiction and fact, history and legend,

prose and poetry is not made in his work. He very often breaks into poetry and light verse and thus affirms the ineptitude of Standard English prose for his story. In the novel, the fusion of two genres is made exceptional. He has contributed to well known 'blurring of the genre' of postmodernism.

Temporal distortion is a literary technique that uses a nonlinear timeline; the author may jump forward or backward in time, or there may be cultural and historical references that do not fit. A crucial feature of the novel is the vast time frame it covers – from the inception of consciousness of modern India represented by the birth of Vyas and the concluding conversation of Yudhisthira with Yama, where Yudhishthira reflects on how events could have shaped differently only to point out that the absolutist category of dharma or the sole truth is a misnomer. Dharma or truth is always in evolution as Derrida points out that truth and extension of meaning can't be a pure mental act which can be preserved in language. Rather it is always vulnerable and subject to changes, misunderstandings and distortion of meanings. The novel, therefore, alternates between dynasties and time frames, interpolating each with an authorial ubiquity that is unmistakably a postmodernist feature.

The Great Indian Novel and Postcolonialism

From the postcolonial point of view, this novel gives expression to the colonized experience and presents it as a caricature showing how the British ruled us with a heavy hand and in that process they butchered all basic principles of humanity. According to Karmakar,

> The British are a nation of shopkeepers, as observed by Napoleon; the British entered India during Mughal rule as traders and they were determined to obtain pole position over the other colonial powers the Portuguese, the Dutch, The Danes and the French. (277-78)

Hence they ruthlessly exploited the resources of this land, treated the people worse than animals and there was large scale mis-governance and anarchy. A case in example is that of cotton industry of our country at that time.

The American Civil War cut off supply of American cotton to Britain (1861-65) causing a cotton famine. Indian raw cotton imports which accounted for 31% of British cotton imports in 1861 rose to 90% in 1862 and reduced to 67% in 1864. The destruction of the Indian cloth industry was complete and now India was reduced to supplying raw cotton to Britain (Dutt 124).

At the same time, they very cunningly smashed and tampered our history and the values associated with this civilization. It is the duty of the colonized to reclaim their history and retrieve the old memories and register it, so as to carry this to their future generation. The people who have suffered mentally and physically because of colonial rule have to reclaim from their experiences. All these are made possible through the works of art which are created after the colonial period. Ironically, the colonial people became acute of their culture and civilization only after the decolonization. After decolonization, the colonialists expressed that India is an underdeveloped country. Tharoor, being a postmodernist and post-colonialist, completely objects to these colonialists. And in the opening of the novel he declares, "India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed country, a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay" (*GIN* 17).

Semler emphasizes that,"very little attention had been given to the history that preceded the history of the so-called historians" (9). Tharoor in his novel brings in the Indian history; critically scrutinizes the colonial relationship and resists colonialist perspectives in his novel. The ideological determined patterns of historical relationship are criticized much by him. Tharoor has devastated the idols of imperial history. The book seeks to unshackle the formerly colonized people from the British Indian government. At that time, the imposing figure of Mountbatten who takes up the role Viscount Drewpad in this novel is significantly reduced to a trivial, vainglorious and insensitive individual and also the General Regional Dyer who is known as Rudyard Kipling is considered as a human tyrant. Edwina Mountbatten that is Georgina Drewpad is the wife of Mountbatten and is used by her as a seducer. Mountbatten uses her as a clandestine weapon to win over the Indian leaders by her charm. "amatory adventuress of libelous renown" (*GIN* 229). The mistakes done by the British during their rule in India are criticized by Tharoor in this novel in paradoxical statements. The author has taken cognizance of the spiteful effects of indoctrination of Indian school children and how our value system, ethics and past glories are in a state of oblivion due to this educational system which has been blindly aped by our governments. This is expressed by the author as "the bastard educational institutions of the British sired on us" (*GIN* 47), and the imperial policy of British to 'divide and rule' has ended up with disastrous consequences.

The Jallianwala Bagh Massacre is a historical event in the freedom movement of our country and in the novel it is termed as 'Bibigarh Garden Massacre'. This is named as Bibigarh Garden in order to be a paradox to the incident that is Bibigarh

rape in Paul Scoot's Raj Fiction *The Day of the Scorpion*. Even Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* has been referred with full of irony and paradox.

This historiographic practice of "looking into itself", only casually and sporadically, until mid-Eighteenth Century, would soon become a demand from History's own "disciplinary matrix". Due to its relativist predisposition, Historicism, more than the Positivism, always had greater affinity with the need to constantly re-elaborate the "look into itself" that constitutes the Theory of History. (Barros 377) The author criticizes the British Policy of 'divide and rule' in which the British officers divided the nation into two parts, so as to create a glide between Muslims and Hindus. Hence, India's partition and the haphazard division of the country on the basis of religion led to unparalleled violence and mass evacuation. Even though the colonizers have left, the struggle and disparity continue in India and will be there in the generations to come.

Tharoor has used his critical way in presenting the novel *The Great Indian Novel*. The titles which are used by the author in this novel like 'The Dual with Crown; The Powers of Silence; A Raj Quartet; Passages through India; The man who Could not be King; The far Power-Villain' are the literary works written by some of the British writers namely, M. M. Kaye, E. M. Forster, Paul Scott and Rudyard Kipling. These authors and the characters in these novels are reincarnated by Sashi Tharoor in this novel as colonial figures. For example, *A passage to India*, reappears in *The Great Indian Novel* as a typical representative of the colonial rule, which is despicable of the natives and their culture. The parody of the colonialist literature written by the British about India embodies the imperialist point of view and also throws light on the status of history as presented to the world. Tharoor has used the lens of literature to focus on injustices caused in history, the lies, the manipulations and also the betrayal and deceit.

Gustav Droysen, a German historicist, says,

> I consider it [the fact that a historical writing without any perspective is conceived as excellent] an Eunuch partiality; and if impartiality and historical truths consist in observing things this way, then the historians are the worst and the worst the best. I don't wish anything rather than expose the relative truth in my point of view. I want to show how my country, political and religious convictions and my systematic study allowed me to arrive at my point of view. The historian must have the courage to recognize these limitations, and accept the fact that the limited and the particular are richer than the common and general. (235-36).

In this novel there are a number of alluded titles; for example like "The Twice Born Tale" , "The Dual with Crown", "The Powers of Silence," "A Raj Quartet", "Passages through India", "The Man who could not be King", "The Far Power-Villain", "The Son Also Rises", "Midnight's Parents" and "Darkness at noon". Tharoor has presented the history of India in this novel from a subjective point of view as an individual. Like Rushdie he is also of the view that biased repossession of the past provides a version of truth which is legitimate for an individual. As the narrator Ved Vyas says, "It is my truth, Ganapathi; just as the crusade to drive out the British and the Hindu was Karna's truth" (*GIN* 104). The certainty of the history is destabilized, distorted and decentred by the authors Rushdie and Tharoor through their narration of individual truth. Tharoor has focused on drawing a line between the politico religious war Kurukshetra in the epic, *Mahabharata* and the freedom struggle against the Colonial rule in the novel, *The Great Indian Novel*.

Conclusion

This novel thus cannot be just said as a work of fiction and the author in his work has made an attempt to face the reality through the fictional spectacles. This novel becomes the historiography to revisit the mythical past with irony and parody. The role of irony in this novel is not simply a structural device but a mode of discernment. The narrator has parody in his tone and attitude in the novel. Tharoor builds up a complex network of connotation on several levels which eventually results in an exceptional parody. This parody is a unique style and technique in the novel. The novel is rich in intertextuality and throughout there is a merger of history and myth. The reader should have deep background knowledge of the epic as well as the history of India in order to fully grasp the nuances, and at the same time immerse in the style and technique of the novelist. It is truly a postmodern work which also has blended in itself the elements of postcoloniality in it.

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