Colonial Historiography Vs Postcolonial Historiography: History, Myth and Allegory in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) challenges and subverts colonial historiography to reclaim India's national history. Its agenda lies in revisiting and rewriting the Western version of Indian history. It attempts to present history of the twentieth century India from a postcolonial perspective. In regard with his own writing, Tharoor himself has stated: "my fiction seeks to reclaim my country's heritage for itself, to tell in an Indian voice, a story of India" (*Bookless,* 25). He further opines: "I am a student of history and I am concerned with the recording of the history - my work is conscious about the various ways that history can be told and recorded" (121). The Novel narrates the story of modern/postcolonial India and problematizes the "matter of India" and contests and debates some of the canonical notion of traditional historiography by implicating ancient Indian myths, oral tradition, digressive narrative technique, and other literary devices such as satire, magic realism, and other meta fictional devices.

The novel derives its title from the great epic of Hindu mythology, the *Mahabharata* (*Maha* means Great and *Bharata* means India), the Great Indian Novel. The *Mahabharata,* the authorship of which is accredited to Ved Vyas, is an epic tale that describes the dynastic struggle for the crown and throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the *Pandavas* and the *Kauravas.*

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Tharoor re-appropriates and contextualizes this epic tale to tell the history of Indian Independence and subsequent history, up through the 1980s, making it the story of the nascent Indian democracy. In the novel, Tharoor has adroitly recasted this two-thousand-year-old epic with fictional but clearly explicit and recognizable events and characters from the twentieth-century Indian political sphere. Expressing his indebtedness to the epic in the "Afterward" of the novel, Tharoor himself has confessed that "Many of the characters, incidents, and issues in the novel are based on people and events described in the great epic the *Mahabharata*, a work which remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India." (419). Evidently, it can be argued that the novel is a modern day epic in prose about India which at once does a parody of the *Mahabharata* as well as of fictional rewriting of the modern Indian history coalescing myth, history, dreams, religion and legends.

The novel is set in the princely state of *Hastinapur* (with explicit resemblances to Delhi) of colonial times which is soon to be annexed to the Raj. It is compartmentalized into 18 Books marking a parallel to the eighteen *Parvas* of the *Mahabharata*. The names of these books in the novel allude to and parody several canonical texts and fictions written on India. The story is narrated from the point of view of V.V. who is dictating it to a South Indian named Ganapathi. V. V. and Ganapathi correspond to Ved Vyas, the author of the epic *Mahabharata* and Lord Ganesh respectively and just like the epic, Ganpathi agrees to transcribe, provided V. V works to his pace. V. V. is going to dictate the story of his life and times, the song of modern India in prose which in his opinion can be "nothing less than *the Great Indian Novel*" (18). He tells:

> What I am about to dictate is the definitive account of my life and times, and you know what a life and times mine have been. Brahm, in my epic I shall tell of past, present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth; of what is, of what was, of what should have been. (18)

V. V. takes the *Mahabharata* to be the starting point. He tells Ganpathi about his own illegitimate birth as a result of pre-marital union of his mother *Satyavati* with a wandering sage *Parashar*. He then builds the early family tree of Hastinapur, introducing its members one by one exactly the way they were in the source text. The incidents like *Shantanu's* marraiage with

Ganga, his re-marriage with *Satyavati*, *Bhism's* pledge, *Amba, Ambika* and *Ambalika* episode and their *Niyog* with V. V. after the death of the King *Vichitravirya* and the birth of *Dhritrashtra, Pandu* and *Vidur* are left untouched as they were in the original epic. Once the stage is set, V. V. brings in the historical persons of his times with a mythic costume over them. Thereafter, the lives of the great Indian leaders like Mahatama Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Sardar Patel, Jay Prakash Narayan, Indira Gandhi and many others surface in the novel. V.V.'s personal memories plunge into history, swiftly moving through the incidents of colonial India, freedom struggle and the years of post-Independence India and simultaneously drawing their mythical parallels. Like Saleem Sinai in *Midnight's Children*, V. V. also presents the entire history of India, beginning with India under the regime of the British Empire in the late nineteen/early twentieth century down to India during the Emergency and after. It records all the major political historical events of modern India such as appearance of Gandhi in Indian politics with Champaran Satyagrah, Jalliawallah Bagh Massacre, the Dandi March, Crips Mission, the Round Table Conference and the Quit India Movement along with the events of the Pakistan and India's Independence and Partition, the liberation of Goa, Indo- China, Indo-Pak wars, the birth of Bangladesh and Emergency and the after.

In the colonial historical writings, the colonists were credited to bring to the subcontinent political unity, the concept of modern education, modern industries, nationalism, modern judiciary system and so forth. It has been further noted that the liberal imperialist historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries have written about British imperialist liberalism with a commitment to Indian self-government, which is foregrounded in enlightenment policies. As per the 'official' version, these were for the benefits of Indians, who were in need to acquire and internalize certain ideas and concepts, such as historical consciousness, before they would be ready to rule themselves and to be educated and develop into being 'citizen' first. Ranjit Guha asserts that colonists and neo-colonialist historiographies describe:

> Indian nationalism as a sort of 'learning processes' through which the native elite become involved in the politics by trying to negotiate the maze of institution and the corresponding cultural complex introduced by the colonial authorities in order to govern the country.(2)

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Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* challenges this 'official' or 'imperalist' version of history and attempts to foreground alternative indigenous historical versions of reality in its fictional mode. He openly criticizes imperial historiography and its projection of India as a nation without history and development. In the very beginning of the novel, the narrator makes his subversive aesthetics prominent when he pronounces:

> They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me, creasing their eight-hundred-rupee suits and clutching their moulded plastic briefcases, to announce in tones of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop. Stuff and nonsense, of course...I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. (18)

Tharoor mythologizes political history of postcolonial India and creates a fictional narrative in which the stories of ancient and modern India straddle each other and work together to reclaim a holistic image of India's cultural heritage. As Ved Vyas, the narrator of the novel states that this novel is a story "of past present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay of death and rebirth; of what is and what was, of what should have been" (18). Tharoor, by using the *Mahabharata's* mythical narrative to frame his story of postcolonial modern India, participates in the typical Indian tradition. The use of the myth in postcolonial literary text is designed and directed to bring into consideration the glory and significance of colonized nation's indigenous cultural, historical and religious heritage which has been decomposed or forgotten due to the imposed colonial ideologies. The study of myths has been interpreted as the strategy of liberation and revival of the cultural heritage for the assertion of identity and self in postcolonial writings.

Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is also a part of postcolonial strategy to question the veracities and conventions of imperialst historiography. Blurring the boundaries between myth

and history, the novel attempts to mythologize contemporary modern history of India. Imagining Indian present in the garb of its ancient past, Tharoor's recasting of some of the select recent events and individuals in the matrix of the original *Mahabharata*, follows the old Indian tradition of blending history with mythology. All the characters of the novel bear the names and echo the qualities and attributes of the mythical characters of the *Mahabharata* but, at the same time, explicitly embody the historical personages of the twentieth century India. An explicit analogy can be drawn between these historical and mythical characters. The contrived confluence of mythical characters with historical figures is, most of the times, so natural if not exact that the readers will clearly visualize the parallel between the *Mahabharata* and modern Indian History. They will have least difficulty in accepting that the poor helpless old Bhisma of the epic is the sidelined Gandhi at the close of Partition; that the blind Dhritrashtra is idealist visionary Jawahar Lal Nehru; Pandu is Subhash Chandra Bose; Vidur is Sardar Patel; Duryodhini (effeminate Duryodhan) is Indira Gandhi; and most significantly Draupadi is our democracy and Pandavas represent the five pillars of this democracy - Yudhisthir as Judiciary, Bhim as Army, Arjun as Press, Nakul and Sahdev as IAS and IFS respectively. Tharoor has tried his best to show a parallel between the lives of mythical figures and their historical correspondents but, at the same time, he also does some significant changes to balance his conceited comparison. Tharoor retains the essential traits and attributes of both the mythological and historical figures but appropriates their bodily features and some other necessary qualities to fit them into contemporary history of the nation: Tharoor's Ganga Datta (Bhishm) has been attributed with the traits of Gandhi and Bhishm both: while his body is, "thin as a papaya plant…peering at you through round-rimmed glasses" (35) and many other traits and events of his life echo Gandhi, his parentage is similar to that of Bhishm; Dhristrarth too appropriately resembles Nehru with his "aquiline nose and aristocratic bearing….,Cambridge education and blind Fabian Socialism" (41); Pandu also, with his roundish little glasses that give him "the appearance of a Bengali teacher or a Japanese admiral" resembles the personality and character of Subhash Chandra Bose (42). The two most vibrant liaisons of the historical with the mythical characters can be found in the delineations of Draupadi and Duryodhan. Draupadi Mokrasi (Democracy) is the bastard child born out of the licentious liaison between Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and the Viscountess Georgiana Drewped, the wife of the last Viceroy (the wife of Lord Mountebettan). She is born on the same day India was proclaimed republic, i.e. 26 January, 1950 and, later, is married to five Pandavas (the five pillars

of our Indian democracy). In the novel, professor Jennings, a tutor to Draupadi, describes her as a person who can live, learn and adopt herself to the conditions in which she lives. She can easily mix and play with the neighborhood children, irrespective of caste, creed, and culture (democracy). Draupadi is shown to be in dangerously poor health after the death of her biological father. This symbolizes the political turmoil after Nehru's death when there was strife amongst rival politicians for power. Draupadi, as democracy is at her worst when her half sister Priya Duryodhini (Indra Gandhi) is in power. Just like her epic-counterpart, Draupadi, here also, is to be robbed of by Duryodhan. But here Tharoor does some remarkable and important changes. Duryodhan is changed into equally powerful female Priya Duryodhini, the only daughter of blind Dhritrashtra and Gandhari who stripped the nation off the values which we inherited and constitutional rights which we had to cherish. Tharoor sees Draupadi's *chir-harana* as a perfect metaphor to describe the Emergency, as the people of the nation were robbed off of their fundamental rights of freedom. At times, in the process of superimposition of the events and characters of the twentieth century modern India on the original structure of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor takes liberties with the original story. The characters of Kunti, who is found "smoking Turkish cigarettes, wearing her Banaras sari, Bombay Nails, Bangalore sandals and Bareilly bangles which advertised her fabled elegance" (265) and Krishna whose insufficient portrayal proves to be his foremost and glaring failure can be the cases in point. Linking of Lal Bahadur Shastri with Shishupal also seems very much objectionable. However, in the final estimates, Tharoor succeeds in retelling the political history of modern India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the *Mahabharata*. Simultaneously, Tharoor has also re-clothed and infused all those well-known mythical characters and events with contemporary significance. In addition, there are also several incidents that conflate historical with mythical. Analogy drawn between Draupadi and Democracy: Draupadi's (Democracy) marriage with Arjun (media) and comparison between mythical events of Draupadi's s*chir-haran* and Mrs. Indira Gandhi's declaration of the Emergency, all confirm the mélange. The entire story leaves no doubt in the reader's mind that the story V. V. is dictating to his scribe is the history of modern India, starting from Gandhiji's arrival into Indian politics during the British Raj to the re-election of Indira Gandhi after the Emergency, which V. V. has

superimposed on the basic structure of the *Mahabharata* making essential changes and variations in the source text. However, it can also be argued that with the increasing number of characters and increasing complexity and divergence of two histories, the author finds it difficult, at places, to embrace the enormity of his task.

By blending myth and history, Tharoor seems to foreground Indian historical sense where, as Parth Chaterjee says, "myth history and the contemporary- all become the part of the all same chronological sequence; one is not distinguish from another; the passage from one another, consequently, is entirely unproblematic" (117). Tharoor's deliberate conflation of all the characters of the novel from postcolonial India with the *Mahabharata*'s mythical figures is his a candid attempt to remember distorted ancient glorious past of India, thus paying the ways for self-identity and assertion of the Indian past. The Novel blends myth and history and two different times that operate in the novel from the very beginning: mythical and historical time. The mythical formation of the novel also undermines the Western model of the historical consciousness, which is linear.

The Novel also repudiates European models of historiography foregrounding the idea the sense of history which can be culturally relative. V.V./Tharoor opens his narrative by rejecting the Western historical narratives of Progress and Reason. "They tell me India is an underdeveloped country.....I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage....underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay". (18) Along with this repudiation of ideals of progress offered by Western modernity, V. V. also repudiates European notion of history offering his own indigenous definition :

> History, Ganpathi – indeed the world, the universe, all human life, and so, too, every institution under which we live- is in a constant state of evolution. The world and everything in it is being created and re-created even as I speak, each hour, each day, each week, going through unending process of birth and rebirth has made us all. India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again.(245)

As it is pointed out earlier and evident from the passage, V.V. makes distinction between Indian notions of history and that of the West. The underlying philosophy in which V.V. is interpreting history as a part of an eternal present that is opposed to the teleological and

conclusive notions of history in the West, can aptly justify Indianness of V.V.'s historical sense, if we analyse his view in the light of Ashis Nandy's remarks on history that "If for the West the present was a special case of unfolding history, for Gandhi as a representative of traditional India, history was a special case of an all-embracing permanent present, waiting to be interpreted and reinterpreted" (57).

Throughout the novel, V.V. mostly follows the chronological order of historical events. He uses linear narrative to convey his (hi)story of twentieth-century India. However, the chronological order of events and narrative linearity is, at times, flaunted by the narrator who jumps from one story to another before finishing the former. Self-reflexive confession to Ganpathi on the chronological inexactitude of the narrative comes from being 'handcuffed to history' which V. V. honestly acknowledges:

> I cannot bear to think much longer of my pale pained son, Ganpathi. I do not wish to prolong his stumbling saga through the various stages of this narrative. Let us pay the price of of chronological inexactitude to follow the rest of his story now, so that i may relinquish this heavy burden of historical memory, strained by the additional weights of paternity and helplessness. Come, Ganpathi: we shall leave the others frozen in their in time.... (175)

If the structure of The Novel is mythical, its narrative mode is allegorical, used as a postcolonial aesthetics strategy to challenge or subvert the colonial historiography. Allegory traditionally has been defined as a discourse that evokes events, personages and actions in a narrative that lie outside the narrative where these are evoked. It is a symbolic fictional narrative that conveys meaning not explicitly set forth in the narrative thus it recognizes the impossibility of direct representation offering the possibility of indirectly representing the unpresentable. According to Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffins and Helen Tiffin, "…it becomes particularly significant for postcolonial writers for the way in which it disrupts notion of orthodox history, classical realism and imperial representation in general" (9) which have been appropriated by them to resist the, "allegorical representation of imperial dominance" (ibid). Though allegorical narratives can be found in every age in every society, and in India, they are acknowledged as the

most popular form of story-telling (the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* themselves are the allegories narrating the war between good and evil), yet allegories have become more popular and are extensively used in the postcolonial writings in which there is to create a counter discourse to the subjugating colonial representation.

When confronting *The Great Indian Novel* also, the recent and typical critical response has been to read the book as what Fredric Jameson calls a 'national allegory'. For Jameson, this phrase means simply that the different characters or aspects of any particular colonial/post-colonial literary work act always as emblems for certain political, or sociological or historical realities – and for Tharoor this is an Indian history and culture.

Thus, the autobiography of V. V. is necessarily going to be the biography of the nation and, this, without any surprise, becomes true also. The narrator is found engaged in giving an allegorical form to India and its history. This allegorical impulse can be traced throughout the novel as Tharoor is found trying his best to record every important political detail of independent India through his assortment of characters from the *Mahabharata*. Allegory in the novel works through the prominence of comparisons, analogies, and metaphors which have been constitutive features of the allegorical writing, a quintessentially medieval or Renaissance genre in the West, and in ancient India also (it was the most favored narrative mode, the stories of *Panchtantra* would be an example in case). Historians/writers in the postcolonial context, tend to use allegory for writing their own version of history, disfavoring Eurocentric notion of historiography. V. V. in the novel is seen applying this very devise to historicize his story. The most powerful metaphor is the metaphor of birth of democracy that is part of the larger metaphor of the birth of the nation as if it were a human child. Draupadi Mokrasi (Di Mokrasi), illegitimate daughter of Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and Lady Drewpad (Lady Mountbettan) and wife to all five Pandavas, is a metaphor for our emergent republican democracy, and the history of the nation, in a metaphorical sense, turns out to be the account of her growth. And, truly confirming to the claims of the narrator, this child becomes a favourite metaphor who speaks of the changing face of Indian democracy, the phases of Indian democracy being described through the changes in the body of Draupadi Mokrasi. The periods of conflict between Morarji Desai and Indira Gandhi, and more importantly, the Emergency, are explicitly conflated with her growth or degeneration: *And Draupadi Mokrasi, still beautiful, began to appear plump, her instinctive smile creasing the flesh of her face in the*

slightest suggestion of a double chin... (342) (when the compromise is made between Indira Gandhi and Morarji Desai who was appointed as Deputy-Prime-minister) *And Draupadi Mokrasi, running a fever, took to bed, complaining of alternating hot flushes and chills….* (343) (when Morarji Desai resigns) *And Draupadi Mokrasi, was diagnosed as asthmatic, her breath coming sometimes in short gasps, the dead air trapped in her bronchia struggling to expel itself, her chest heaving with the effort to breathe freely….* (352) (when the congress is split)

Thus, the personification of democracy as a person is metaphorical which blurs the distinction between historical and imaginative. Analogy between Indira declaring the Emergency and disrobing of Draupadi Mokrasi is another example of the use of metaphors to report history. Every metaphor, the historian uses is neither more nor less than a tropic model deployed to re-present reality of the past – ancient or recent which foregrounds figurative poetics of historiography. V.V., in the Novel, constructs the past of India figuratively from a different angle composing a narrative of the chosen facts of twentieth-century Indian history on the mythic story-structure. He uses various postcolonial devices to historicise recent Indian past. The story of the *Mahabharata* seems to him a perfect 'metaphor' (representational) to describe the historical present of India in terms of its ancient mythical past, integrating the characters of ancient story and modern history into one structure emphasizing their similarities or essences. It helps him in reducing his nation (Colonial India and Post-independence Democracy) to individuals while negating the literal meaning of his words forcing the readers to peep into history differently.

To conclude history, according to Tharoor, is a process of births and rebirths, caused by sudden changes, projecting there by a kind of catastrophic view of history; for the "following dance of the creation and evolution" is visualized by him not as a "tranquilizing waves of smoothly predictable occurrence but as a series of sudden events, unexpected happenings, dramas, crises, accidents, emergencies" (245). Therefore, the novel offers new and contemporary material about the story of India, as told through the ancient epic. It tells about the Indian history from the birth of nationalist movement under the British Raj to the situation of the country after the assassination of Mrs Gandhi. The novel is essentially a vision of a new India which consists of modern, colonial and post colonial period.

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