
THE ARTISTIC FUSION OF HISTORY AND HAGIOGRAPHY, PARODY AND POLEMIC – THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL OF SHASHI THAROOR

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Abstract: This paper focuses on the diplomatic and diasporic writer Shashi Tharoor's aim in writing *The Great Indian Novel* – the restoration of good sense and sound moral values to a society reeling under decadent trends. To carry out this serious purpose Tharoor has assumed a seemingly flippant tone using his satirical wit. It seems that Tharoor has written a lampoon against the vices of our age where he can ridicule and attack any situation which he does not like. Tharoor's forte is the use of humour and satire with devastating effect in exposing autocracy. As a whole, the novel is a marvel in balancing polar opposites like the past and the present, and the sublime and the ridicule. Tharoor presents a comic retelling of the Mahabharata with figures from the recent Indian history corresponding to the epic's characters. The myth and legend are used to explain and interpret prevailing trends in the recent Indian social and political scenario. Tharoor wants all people to know what exactly is implied by "Dharma". So he has selected *The Mahabharata* legend as an objective correlative to his historical novel. The purport of *The Great Indian Novel* is to show that Truth is one and Dharma is one (*The Dharma of the Self or the Spirit*). The Indian sages of yore strove for such Dharma and spread glory and splendour around them. Tharoor wishes that the modern heroes can realise unity in diversity only when they pursue such Dharma.

Keywords: Diaspora, Alienation, Lampoon, Expatriates, Flippant, Dharma.

Introduction: Indian-English literature in the recent past has attracted a widespread interest, both in India and abroad. It has come to be realised of great significance in world-literature. Its position earlier had never been clearly grasped because the critics who set the standards and perspectives in European literature were not closely acquainted with non-European cultures or its essential elements of its philosophy. But lately there has generated a great deal of enthusiasm in Indian-English and other Commonwealth literatures. It is increasingly being realised that literature being written in Australia, New Zealand, West Indies, South Africa, Canada, Nigeria and India is in no way inferior and that the writers in these countries have contributed substantially and significantly to the modern English literature.

Diasporic literature includes the literary works written by the authors outside their motherland. Their works reflect their culture and background. In a broader sense, diasporic writers are the writers who write in a foreign land but remain connected to their motherland through their works. This type of literature has its roots in the sense of loss and alienation, which emerged as a result of migration and expatriation. Generally, diasporic literature deals with alienation, displacement, existential ruthlessness, nostalgia and quest for identity. It also addresses issues related to amalgamation or disintegration of culture. In Greek, the term 'Diaspora' means 'to disperse'. It is the voluntary or forcible movement of people from their homelands into new regions. Originally used for the Jewish externment from its homeland, is now applied as a "metaphoric designation" for expatriates, refugees, exiles and immigrants. The prominent Indian writers in English belong to the Diaspora are V.S. Naipaul, Salman Rushdie, Amitau Ghosh, Jhumpa Lahari, Vikram Seth, Rohinton Mistry and Shashi Tharoor.

Born in London in 1956, Shashi Tharoor is considered to be a child prodigy. His literary work was first published when he was eleven years old. In 1976, while still at college, he won the Rajika Kripalani

Young Journalist Award for Indian journalists under thirty. He had a doctorate from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University, USA and his articles have appeared in Indian journals. He regularly writes for 'Gentlemen' (Bombay). He is a current member of the Indian Parliament from the Thiruvananthapuram constituency in Kerala and former Minister of State for Human Resources Development and and the former Minister of State for External Affairs, Dr. Shashi Tharoor displayed much experience from the several part of the world as the official candidate of India for the succession to the UN Secretary General Kofi Annan in 2006 apart from his official cadre, he contributes much of his time for writing the novels. He contributed many articles to the leading international magazines like 'The New York Times', 'The Times of India'.

Besides offering a glimpse of graphic variegated Indian Socio-Cultural Complex, Indian English Novels are useful indices showing the interesting innovations in narrative technique practised by the writers of each decade. Our best surmises about an author's world-view have to be made on the basis of the issues he raises in his fiction and the 'values' he succeeds in putting across directly or indirectly.

Whatever may be chosen framework of a story- past or present legend of history or contemporary events, the ultimate test has to be the essential meaning within these external trappings. In the case of Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* this meaning is the un-changeability of human nature. The so called social changes and transformations wrought in one's day to day existence by scientific progress and increased use of technological gadgets are at best peripheral. They have no impact on basic elemental human characteristics like anger, envy, lust, greed etc; Legends celebrate the conquest of these infirmities by heroes after a prolonged spirited struggle. History is nothing but the recounting of the preferences or conformity to a preferred scale of values, assessment of an experimental novel can only be within the ambit of the object set by the writer himself. Criticism has to be an examination of whether or not the writer has come up to the level of the experimentation. In this case it is the use of myth and legend to explain and interpret the prevailing trends in the recent Indian and Social and Political Scenario.

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Shashi Tharoor presents a comic retelling of the Mahabharata with figures from the recent Indian history corresponding to the epic's characters.

For example, Mahatma Gandhi with his belief in celibacy and inflexible moral code makes a credible Ganga Datta (Ganga Putra Bhishma, who took a vow of lifelong celibacy). The comic element is provided by his leading the people not on the great March for the Salt but on the great Mango march to defy the British to who wish to seize the mango, the commonest Indian fruit. Tharoor does not try for a one tone correspondence. The narrator V.V. (an active participant as well as a story teller as in the epic *The Mahabharata*) contains a number of Indian Statesmen, from, C.R.R. (nationalist leader and author of the popular version of the Mahabharata) to Acharya Kripalani and Vinoba Bhave. The split in the Congress

party, caused partly by Indira's bid for complete power, corresponds to the partition of Hastinapur. Dhritarashtra produces not a hundred sons but a single daughter Priya Duryodhani (highly Indira Priya Darsini, Mrs. Gandhi's full name). The irrelevant humour is likely to offend many readers especially those who venerate the leaders who led India to freedom. Draupadi, the heroine of the epic, is here the illegitimate child of the blind Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and the lady Draupad, the last vice-reign of India (Lady Mountbatten) but this child born of the east and the west had great symbolic significance.

A Plethora of puns, alliterations, comic verse, monologues, and every literary device is employed to provide a laugh, a page. Even the headings of the 18 chapters (Mahabharata is in 18 cantos) are amusing puns – "The Jewel in the Crown". "The Rigged Veda" (The Rig Veda), "The Bungle Book" or "The Reign of Error". The reader must have good knowledge of India to appreciate the comedy fully. The brilliant prose is interspersed with verse. Verse is used for the passage corresponding to the Gita. When Arjuna, a Journalist has doubts about his fighting with his cousin, Priya Duryodhani at the poll. Though Tharoor's version is very funny, the essential message of the Gita is not distorted. Towards the end of the book, Tharoor increasingly takes recourse to dream sequences and ends by pointing out that story never ends. V.V. realises that he must retell the long story for he had so far told it from a completely mistaken perspective. Many critics have hailed *The Great Indian Novel* as a masterpiece of post-modernism, for Tharoor challenges the concept of a single truth or a right perspective of looking at things. Perhaps the change is not so much a question of post-modernism as one of trying to depict the complex realities of India. Tharoor may have found the basic uncertainty is the only possible response. Though there is a lot of comic exaggeration, Tharoor's description of India rings true. There can be no doubt about his intimate knowledge of the country, though he has spent much of his life abroad.

The sole aim of Tharoor in writing the novel is the restoration of good sense and sound moral values to a society reeling under decadent trends. To carry out this serious purpose. Tharoor has assumed a seemingly flippant tone using his satirical wit. There are many places in the novel where Tharoor himself has said about why he wrote the book and about what he wanted to achieve. It seems that Tharoor has written a lampoon against the vices of our age where he can ridicule and attack any situation which does not like for this purpose Tharoor has used a keen and often abusive satire, sometimes in prose and sometimes in verse to mock at an individual or to ridicule a situation. Irrelevance is an accepted comic device lampoons and Tharoor handled the characters like Pandu and the situations like the Striptease of D.Mokراسi irrelevantly.

Tharoor's scholarly vigour his ability to marshal facts and his talent in presenting statistical details have bolstered his thesis in a way acceptable to every reader. Sometimes it appears that the novelist has expanded more effort and rhetoric than is necessary. But one should bear in mind that an anecdotal method of presentation of a socio-cultural construct needs even more to fulfil the ambition of achieving social cohesion in India through Art.

The Mahabharata of Vedavyas believes that passion is an overwhelming alien invasion. This concept of passion is age old. Modern psychologists believe that desire and longing are the two primary and prime movers of passion. Shashi Tharoor's presentation of Pandu's lust or Subhadra's lasciviousness can be explained in this modern context.

Primarily, Tharoor is moved to the point of shedding many a bitter tear at the way the post independent politicians have been bungling everything and mismanaging the affairs, making the noble sacrifices of the pre-independent heroes' worthless buffoonery. Tharoor has given a unique expression to his fears. It is said that Elizabethans played with words and the meta-physicals played with ideas. In a similar way, one can say that Shashi Tharoor has played with his bitter experiences by using burlesque, satire, sarcasm and what not. Only when the reader reads the *Great Indian Novel* in the spirit of playing a game, in which the writer has written it, he can appreciate the novel giving due weight to every single bit of an incident in the novel.

Even from the beginning of the novel, Shashi Tharoor explains to the reader his attitude towards the subject, his approach towards the main topic of emergency and also his intention in making the novel an experiment. In the very first chapter V.Vji, the narrator feels that the reader might suppose the novel to be “a piddling western thriller” (Tharoor.18) so he cautions him by stating that his novel may contain many irrelevancies, which may due to this old age (V.Vji is supposed to be eighty eight years old) Shashi Tharoor intentionally made his novel extravagant. Hence he cleverly selected an 80 year old man as the narrator.

The climax and the central motive are presented in the last chapters of the novel. Hence they need special attention for Yudhisthir appeared farfetched. In some places, the analogy appears gargled. For instance, Drona in the Mahabharata is on the side of Duryodhana whereas Jayaprakash, the counterpart of Drona is not on the side of Indira Gandhi, the counterpart of Duryodhana. One cannot help feeling that Tharoor should have avoided the obscenity in the novel but taken as a whole the merits in the novel, compensate more than defects.

Most modern writers discovered that the ancient epics contained ideas that could penetrate into the very blood of whole societies. They cherished to revive the heroic spirit contained in the epic by exposing the shallowness of the modern societies. T.S. Elliot’s *The Waste Land* is one such experiment and Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* is another. If *The Waste Land* is a garland of quotations, *The Great Indian Novel* is a bouquet containing eighteen different flowery tales of a single plot. The only moral of the battle Kurukshetra and the epic Mahabharata is that there are no real victors. Everyone loses at the end. This is an experience common to all the writers of epics. Homer had a similar experience after writing about *The Trojan War*. Even the sage Valmiki was not happy after Ravana’s death. The result of the epic *Paradise Lost* is after all the fall of man. Even the modern epic poet T.S. Elliot wrote his epic and called it *The Waste Land*. He wrote it after *The First World War*, the first of its kind in the world; it is a demonstration of waste at the global level. Elliot’s reaction against it is one of frustration. Tharoor’s mood is similar while writing *The Great Indian Novel*.

Most strangely, all these great writers wrote their books not to demonstrate a defeatist philosophy to the world, but to show a way out for the people who are being carried away by defeatism. T.S. Elliot wants the modern man against indulging in unnatural sex. Tharoor wants all people to know what exactly is implied by “Dharma”. So he has selected *The Mahabharata* legend as an objective correlative to his historical novel. He adds a note on Dharma at the end of the novel. In that note, many alternative definitions are given and any one of them can be applied to the word Dharma in the novel, as occasion demands. It is not just equal to the western word ‘duty’. It tells about the way by which man lives. The word ‘truth’ again is one such word whose equivalent in Sanskrit is ‘Satya’. The different heroes of India strove for their own versions of truth, not realising the truth is one.

The purport of *The Great Indian Novel* is to show that Truth is one and Dharma is one (The Dharma of the Self or the Spirit). The Indian sages of yore strove for such Dharma and spread glory and splendour around them. Tharoor wishes that the modern heroes can realise unity in diversity only when they pursue such Dharma.

The special achievement of *The Great Indian Novel*, its artistic fusion of History and Hagiography, Parody and Polemic to highlight the unchangeable core in the human character has rightly made it a classic in Indian English Literature.

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