CHAPTER IV

Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*

*Ithaka has given you the splendid voyage.*

*Without her you would never have set out,*

*But she has nothing more to give you.*

*And if you find her poor,*

*Ithaka has not deceived you.*

*So wise have you become, of such experience,*

*That already you will have understood*  

*What these Ithakas mean.*

(“Ithaka” by Constantine Petrou Cavafy)

The voyage of the Indian Novel in English entered a new phase with the emergence of the new crop of writers on the literary scene. 1980s has been a witness to the revolutionary change in the technique and attitudes of these writers. These young writers were in fact a source of inspiration to their predecessors too and we observe a few
veteran writers like Khushwant Singh adopting new modes of fiction writing, particularly historical fiction. Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children*, published in 1981, took the literary world by storm. Rushdie rejected the traditional, social realist novel in favour of larger-than-life allegorical characters and events in the tradition of magic realism. He not only showed a fluency in Standard English but also the confidence that allows the use of various kinds of Indian English. Rushdie made extravagant use of myth, oral tradition, and different versions and ideas of history. The style was sprawling, rambling, full of digressions and humour. He aimed at providing an opportunity to the members of marginalized groups or national minorities to place themselves centre-stage in the drama of national history, rather than feeling the pressure to subsume themselves in the mainstream, official version. He thus dared to challenge the official version of ‘History’. As Ron Shepherd puts it:

*Midnight’s Children* differs from earlier fiction in that most of the usual ground rules associated with the older form of fiction are broken: the unities of time and place and characters are, at best, unstable: the narrative fluctuates uncertainly between first and third person: ordinary notions of fictional realism are subverted, natural law becomes unnatural or supernatural even though the novel is not in any straightforward sense religious or metaphysical, the novel is full of cryptic clues, archaic utterances…. It is a novel of signs and gestures and sleight of hand narrated with a passion for narrating rather than for clarifying meaning. (qtd in Reddy 99-100)
Many other writers of historical fiction writing after Rushdie followed in his footsteps. Some tried to follow him whereas others encouraged by his success tried their hands at different techniques and methods to approach history, thereby producing works which took the Indian Historical Novel to greater heights. Two of these novels, Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* and Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel*, will be discussed in this chapter. Both the works share some common traits in their treatment of history. Rushdie and Tharoor seem to echo each other in their assertion of the fictional aspect of their works which have differently approached foundational narratives. Both the novels have as their backdrop the same time period of the modern Indian history; both show a playful irreverence to the official versions of history and both the novelists are centrally and essentially concerned with the nature of “reality” yet both use different tactics and techniques to achieve that goal.

*Midnight’s Children* (1981), Rushdie’s second novel and winner of the Booker McConnell Award in 1981 and also the prestigious Booker of the Bookers Award is a panoramic book spanning a period of seventy years in India’s modern history. The author, born and brought up in the multi-cultural city of Bombay, recreates the vitality and eclectic culture of urban India, with reference to the early decades of the century to the mid-seventies. William Walsh points out, “The novel is a piece of ‘fiction – faction’, by one born in India but settled abroad who tries to recreate his homeland, mixing memory and desire, fact and fantasy reality and vision, time and timelessness” (Walsh 257).
Considered to be an autobiography of the narrator-protagonist, Saleem Sinai, the novel is also the history of India during the period of the action. Though it contains within it many of the major political events between 1947 and 1978, it is unlike the historical novels written by earlier writers of historical fiction as the events in the novel are not recreated but merely recorded, not interpreted but merely inserted into the fabric of the narrative. The 552 page novel of epic proportion looks at the Indian subcontinent through the eyes of a young man born at the stroke of the hour of Indian Independence. Saleem Sinai, the narrator protagonist, is the embodiment of a supreme moment of history, a crystallization of an evolving mood, a distillation of a vision, nostalgic, critical and philosophical. Saleem is one of the midnight’s children, born between 12 midnight and 1:00 a.m. in the night of August 14-15, 1947, the hour of the nascence of free India. Midnight is the point of time where past and future coalesce in the present and there is liberation from the clock time. Midnight is also the province of fantasy which is a dream like recreation of the actual world. The opening of the novel marks the element of fantasy, “I was born in the city of Bombay... once upon a time...” (1). Saleem’s life is the history of the country, “I had been mysteriously handcuffed to history, my destinies indissolubly chained to those of my country” (3). Out of a total of such thousand and one children born at midnight, 420 die and 581 survive up to 1957. This is the story of these children whose privilege it was to be both masters and victims of their own time, “The children of midnight were also the children of time: fathered, you understand, by history”(137).

The novel along with the story of these midnight’s children, is also the story, that encapsulates the experience of three generations of Saleem Sinai’s family, living first in
Srinagar then in Agra, and then in Bombay, before its final migration to Karachi. Saleem Sinai describes the story of three generations to his girl friend, Padma. Sitting up at night in a pickle factory telling his story to Padma, Saleem flaunts his capacity to hold our attention. He is gifted with supernatural power of entering other people’s minds. He says:

And there are many stories to tell, too many, such an excess of intertwined lives, events, miracles, places, rumours, so dense a commingling of the improbable and the mundane. I have been a swallower of lives; and to know me, just the one of me, you’ll have to swallow the lot as well.” (4)

Saleem takes us back, by courtesy of his “all knowing memory” to his grandfather and grandmother, thirty-two years before his own nativity. Saleem’s grandfather, Dr. Aadam Aziz, lived in the beautiful valley of Kashmir. One day Dr. Aziz is informed by boatman Tai, that the landowner Ghani’s daughter is ill. Promptly, Dr. Aziz proceeds to examine her. At the landowner’s house, Dr. Aziz faces a strange scene. He is expected to examine the patient through a hole in the centre of a white sheet, held by two women at both the corners, because Naseem, the landowner’s daughter, according to a Muslim custom, cannot “flaunt her body under the noses of strange men” (19).

In the novel the first event related to a historical event is the day Dr. Aziz gets to see Naseem Ghani’s face. For three years, Aadam had seen, touched, and thrilled at different parts of Naseem’s body through the seven inch hole in a white bed-sheet. Aadam now feverishly desired that Naseem would develop a headache or suffer a scratch on her chin that would need the hole in the sheet to be placed against her face. “On the day the World War ended, Naseem developed the longed -for headache. Such
historical coincidences have littered, and perhaps befouled my family’s existence in the world”(27). Later, Dr. Aziz marries Naseem Ghani and in the wake of his transfer to Agra, leaves for Amritsar. On April 13, 1919, in Amritsar, Mahatma Gandhi’s grand design is distorted and here we find in the novel, description of a major historical event. The novelist narrates the Jallianwala Bagh episode (35) where General Dyer orders the infamous massacre of the unarmed crowd that had gathered for a peaceful assembly at the Jallianwala Bagh to demonstrate against the Rowlatt Acts. Saleem’s grandfather, Dr. Aziz, treats as many victims as he can. Dr. Aziz and Naseem come to live in Agra. Naseem gives birth to five children — three daughters Alia, Mumtaz and Emerald, and two sons Hanif and Mustapha. Mian Abdullah, a friend of Dr. Aziz, who is referred to as ‘Humming bird’ in the novel, had created the Free Islam Convocation almost single-handedly. The alternative organization, the Muslim League wanted the partition of India — an idea that was loathsome to Mian Abdullah, Aadam Aziz, the Rani of Cooch Nahin and Nadir Khan, the secretary of Mian Abdullah. On the day the Convocation was to be held, Mian Abdullah is murdered. Nadir Khan, who escapes and seeks refuge at Aadam Aziz’s house, marries Aadam’s daughter Mumtaz and continues to hide in the basement. Mumtaz falls ill and Dr. Aziz, fearing pneumonia gives her a complete check up on August 6, 1945, the day the atom bomb ploughed into Hiroshima. In the meantime Nadir Khan’s whereabouts are discovered by Major Zulfikar. He raids the Aziz’s residence but Nadir Khan escapes, leaving a note for Mumtaz, declaring a divorce between them. Major Zulfikar marries Emerald, the youngest daughter of Dr. Aziz. Mumtaz later marries Ahmed Sinai, a leather merchant from Delhi, in June 1946, on the day that, “Earl
Mountbatten of Burma held a press conference at which he announced the Partition of India” (91).

Mumtaz, rechristened Amina, leaves for Delhi with her husband, Ahmed Sinai. But, owing to losses in business in the wake of partition riots the Sinais move to Bombay on the advice of Ahmed’s friend, Dr. Narlikar. The Sinais are lured into temptation of buying one of the villas at the Methwold Estate. William Methwold, the owner of the estate, sells the house on a condition that the actual transfer should not take place until midnight, on August 15, 1947. At the stroke of midnight, while India awakens to life and freedom, Vinita, the wife of Wee Willie Winkie, a poor entertainer, gives birth to a baby boy in the Narlikar Nursing Home. The baby, is actually the illegitimate child of Vinita and William Methwold. At the same instant, Amina Sinai too gives birth to a baby boy, in the same nursing home. But the babies are switched over (swapped) by the nurse Mary Pareira. Mary had been ditched by her lover. In this jilted state, Mary performs a revolutionary act. She exchanges the two babies, giving the poor and illegitimate child (Saleem) a life of privilege and condemning the rich-born child (Shiva) to poverty. Saleem grows up in the luxury of the Sinai household, while the real Sinai baby, Shiva, grows up in the slums. Having been born at a crucial moment of history, Saleem claims a place at the centre of things. In surprisingly numerous ways, India, seemingly becomes synonymous to Saleem Sinai and Saleem Sinai to India. The very time of his clock ridden, crime-stained birth, handcuffs him to Indian history. The action of the novel traces Saleem’s antecedents, childhood, adolescence, growth into full adulthood and finally imminent disintegration. He seems to be a symbol of newly independent India, full of promise and high expectation. After all, he is the ‘midnight’s child’ born at the
precise stroke of that magical hour when India, in the words of Jawahar Lal Nehru woke to freedom and kept its tryst with destiny.

The novel is divided into three parts. The first part traces the roots of the family from Kashmir to Bombay, via, Amritsar, Agra and Delhi, and ends with Saleem’s birth; the second part deals with the sojourn in Bombay, the move to Pakistan, and ends with the 1965 Indo-Pak War; the third covers the rape of East Pakistan and ends with the declaration of Emergency by Indira Gandhi and its aftermath. Thus in the second part of the novel, we come across the country’s subsequent losses and blood baths during and after the Partition. They are also Saleem’s losses — hair, finger-tip and blood lettings. The emotional integration of his family echoes the fervour of the country’s apparent emotional integration in the face of the Chinese aggression. The narrator describes the activities of his neighbours at the Methwold Estate; who are filled with discontentment. The assassination of Mahatma Gandhi is mentioned in passing. However, nothing of historical significance is dwelt upon until the linguistic reorganization of states late in 1956. Dr. Narlikar becomes one of the victims of the language marchers, who push him into the sea. Narlikar’s death is also linked to the beginning of the financial and moral degeneration of Saleem’s father. Rushdie goes on to summarize the antagonism between Gujarati and Marathi-speaking people. Of the historical and national implications, Saleem says:

India had been divided anew, into fourteen states and six centrally-administered territories. But the boundaries of these states were not formed by rivers, or
mountains or any natural features of the terrain; they were, instead, walls of words. Language divided us. (216)

In the spring of 1957, elections were held in India, and the Communist Party won a large number of seats. There are two direct links between the story of Saleem and the story of India at this juncture. Shiva and his gang, called ‘Cowboys’ break open the ballot boxes and “fix” the results so that the Congress wins. The communist cause is served by Amina Sinai, who has been meeting her ex-husband Nadir Khan, secretly. She campaigns for Nadir Khan’s Communist Party donating time and money to the destitute who in return vote for the Communist Party. The next public event that occurs is the manslaughter of Homi Catarack, Lila Sabarmati’s lover, by Commander Sabarmati of the Indian Navy. This incident was in the headlines of Indian magazines and newspapers at that time, as the Nanavati Murder Trial. A similar link between private and public events is presented by Saleem in the story of his classmate, Cyrus Dubash, who is made into a religious – cult leader by his widow mother. He becomes lord Khusrov and Bhagwan. The brief narrative of Lord Khusro’s rise and fall brings to mind the stories of Guru Maharaj, Hatha Yogi Lakshman Rao, who claimed he could walk on water, as also, other cult leaders like “Bhagwan” Rajneesh and Mahesh Yogi. In a similar tone Rushdie links Jawahar Lal Nehru’s death to Saleem’s grand father, as also the story of the disappearance of the “sacred relic” from a Srinagar mosque. Saleem comments, “After the death of grandfather, Prime Minister Jawahar Lal Nehru fell ill and never recovered his health. This fatal sickness killed him on May 27, 1964” (319).
But Between 1958 and 1964, Saleem is in the forefront of political events in Pakistan, to which his mother along with her children had emigrated. They stay with General Zulfikar, who plans General Ayub Khan’s military takeover of the country. Incidentally, Saleem, after his migration to Pakistan, loses touch with the ‘Children of the midnight’, whom he had gathered in his brain, in the form of the Midnight’s Children’s Conference, since his tenth birthday. In October 1958, Saleem is with his uncle when the General abducts President Iskandar Mirza from his house and sends him to exile aboard a secret plane. The Sinais finally move permanently to Pakistan in February 1963. The war between India and China, with public reaction and newspaper headlines, is documented by Saleem, as is also the infiltration of Pakistan into Kashmir, and the subsequent Indo-Pak war of 1965. Rushdie uses factual accounts from newspapers and interweaves news of air raids with news of Saleem’s family, culminating in the night of September 22, 1965, when, in different places, all the members of his family die, except for his sister, Jamila. Jamila, during this period of war had become a figure of national pride. Saleem shows a firm conviction that, “… the hidden purpose of the Indo-Pak war of 1965 was nothing more nor less than the elimination of my benighted family from the face of this earth” (386).

In Book Three, Saleem moves in time from 1965 to 1970. He has lost his memory and has become a citizen of Pakistan. Saleem, the Buddha (as he is called in his present amnesiac state, by the soldiers of his unit), whose telepathic powers have been replaced by olfactory powers, is selected by the Pakistani army for the purpose of sniffing, in Pak-Bangladesh War. Saleem records, in passing, that Indira Gandhi’s New Congress Party had just won a landslide victory, with 350 out of a possible 515 seats in the Lok Sbha.
One day when Saleem and other soldiers are passing through a jungle, Saleem is bitten by a snake, which brings back Saleem’s memory. The narrator gives a detailed account of the Freedom Movement of Bangla Desh, the Mukti Vahini Movement, Bangla Desh’s independence and the surrender of General Niazi to General Sam Manekshaw. Saleem is also taken in as a prisoner of war but he escapes by hiding in the basket of Parvati – the witch, another midnight’s child, in Dacca, where she has come as part of an entertainment crew for the Indian soldiers. They arrive in Delhi on February 23, 1973, the time when “coal mines and the wheat market were being nationalized” (397). On May 18, 1974, Major Shiva, who has just returned, a hero, from Bangladesh, meets Parvati “perhaps at the very moment at which the deserts of Rajasthan were being shaken by India’s first nuclear explosion” (472). Major Shiva, a war hero and a representative of the country’s corrupt politicians under Indira Gandhi’s government, establishes a liaison with Parvati and abandons her once she gets pregnant. The progress of Parvati’s pregnancy is parallel to the growing strength of the Janta Party under the leadership of Jaya Prakash Narayan and Morarji Desai. Parvati’s labour pains start on June 12, 1975, the day the Allahabad High Court found Prime Minister Indira Gandhi guilty of two counts of campaign malpractice during the elections of 1971. The thirteen days of Indira Gandhi’s political career following this verdict see Parvati (who can be described as Mother India personified) going through protracted labour pains. At midnight of June 25, 1975, just as Parvati brings forth her child, Indira Gandhi brings forth her brainchild — Emergency Rule. The deaf and dumb state of Ganesha, Parvati’s son, refers to the censorship of Press in India. Sanjay Gandhi’s meteoric rise to power in 1976 is highlighted through two of his projects — clearance of Delhi slums and pavements and mass vasectomy camps to
reduce population. Saleem describes the horrors in several passages referring to the Widow’s hand and in pathetic, funny or horrifying reference to his own ectomization. There are elaborate constructions of interlocking metaphors in this novel and all are built on one basic principle — the provision of an alternate view of history. For example, there is an extended use of the metaphor of black and white:

The Mother of the Nation had white hair on one side and black on the other; the Emergency, too, had a white part — public, visible, documented, a matter for historians — and a black part which, being secret, macabre, untold, must be a matter for us. (421)

The last historical event mentioned in the novel is the election of 1977, when Indira Gandhi’s Congress was defeated by the Janta Party. But Saleem does not foresee any permanence in a party led by a wheel-chaired J. P. Narayan and Morarji Desai. The novel ends with the bleakest prophecies for his son; and for future generations:

yes they will trample me underfoot … reducing me to specks of voiceless dust, just as, all in good time, they will trample my son who is not my son, and his son who will not be his … until a thousand and one midnights have bestowed their terrible gifts and a thousand and one children have died because it is the privilege and the curse of midnight’s children to be both masters and victims of their time … and to be unable to live or die in peace. (533)

The novel, thus, progresses from idealism to disillusionment, from dynamic growth to castration and impotence, premature aging, and death; from a deep sense of
connectedness with the pulse of India to alienation, betrayal, and insignificance. With his final words, the disintegrating Saleem prophesies his fate and articulates the postcolonial condition of his generation. Even though Saleem is cracking into as many pieces as there are Indians, as there are stories to tell, he has successfully told his story — imperfect, unreliable, distorted, needing endless revising to be sure — but, nonetheless triumphantly his own.

_Midnight’s Children_, hence turns out to be a multi-generational, mock-epic family saga, complete with family trees, maps, and a long list of dramatis personae, that tell the story of the protagonist’s family as a national history. The novelist instead of indulging in a social realist novel prefers to portray allegorical characters and events in the tradition of magic realism. The novelist shows an extraordinary confidence in the use of Standard English and makes extensive use of various kinds of Indian English. Myth, oral tradition, and different versions and ideas of history are some of the prominent features of _Midnight’s Children_. The style is sprawling, rambling, full of digressions and humour. _Midnight’s Children_ ends with the recognition that Saleem is at the end of a line. Nehru’s promise has been drained of all possibility for him, personally, and perhaps even India itself has come to the end of that particular road in its history. Saleem recognizes that the country will have to fashion new ideals to inspire its people and move forward, but that will have to be the task of a new generation: “New myths are needed”, he acknowledges, “but that’s none of my business” (532).

The contemporary writers in Indian English do not inhabit a fixed space and also write from multiple perspectives. The endless, versatile, complex, rich and problematic
entity of Indian writing in English encompasses diverse subjects within its widened horizon. They have appropriated the standard British English and made it their own, infusing within it native idioms, market slang, colloquialisms of metropolitans, classical jargons, references to the Hindu pantheon etc. The modified English, over which the Indian writers have mastered is now used for an unbiased presentation of the Indian reality to reveal the 'true' situation to the readers all over the world. *Midnight's Children* is one such novel that is about India in all its varied form. It reveals an India that “must be felt, seen, and reacted to in all its varied textures, overlapping mythologies, fabulous fantasies and harsh realities” (Mattoo 63). Indianness in *Midnight's Children* operates at many levels, ranging from the explicit ones celebrated in the publishers’ blurbs to the most subtly “evocative ones”. “Things are, and yet they are not. A son is a son, and yet not a son. Sometimes the time sequence is lost. All this seems appropriate while describing Indians in their confused search for identity and unreliable grasp of history” (Mattoo 640). The confusion does not end with the search for identity but extends into the very fabric of the nation as also into the lives of its people who want to be modern but also wish to cling to tradition. Thus, Rushdie takes his readers along with him on a roller-coaster ride into the very entrails of the country with all its strengths and weaknesses. With a deceptively comic vision and a mock-epic style through the major part of the book, it tells of the wasted talent, failed dreams and idealism gone berserk. All this is conveyed through the prismatic vision of the narrator—protagonist who is able to project reality, partial, fissured and fragmented but highly absorbing and deeply meaningful. It is, hence, an entertaining personification of Indian life.
Helen Tiffin, in her views regarding the postcolonial writer’s preoccupation with history, construes it to be a result of the writer’s deliberate attempt to resist colonial appropriation or rejection in order to rehabilitate or establish the self. Since all colonial ideology tends to legitimize colonial exploitation, writers of the postcolonial period are actively engaged with the question of history (Tiffin 169-88).

Viewed from this perspective, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* can be interpreted as yet another attempt of a postcolonial writer to re-read history of his country. Tharoor in an interview to Harry Kreisler accepts this fact that “the writing has helped me to reclaim and reinvent a sense of my Indianness.” As a writer, enmeshed in his country’s culture and history at many levels, Tharoor reveals an extraordinary understanding of the Indian life and ethos. In his first novel, *The Great Indian Novel*, he takes the stories of the great epic, *Mahabharata*, written sometime between 800BC and 800AD, and has permeated the national consciousness of India. Tharoor has reinvented these stories as an account of the political history of India, from the British days to the present. About this reinvention of history, Tharoor in the Preface to *The Great Indian Novel*, confesses, “For every tale that I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives. This is my story, of the India I know with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions all mine.”

Tharoor however is not unique in his fascination for history, for if Frantz Fanon is to be believed, all postcolonial writers are faced with this quest for the pre-colonial past and questions of origin (Fanon 200). And in the process, Tharoor articulates a vision of India as the home of a rich diversity, of a rich pluralism that is manifest in both its social
institutions and its political democracy. Though offering fresh historical perspective of
the past, he has examined the historical material with empirical and skeptical vigour. The
author seems to be most upset by the darkest period in the history of free India, that is,
the Emergency promulgated in 1975. He uses the mythic setting of the ancient epic
*The Mahabharata* to foreground the eternal present, the continuance of the historical process
from India’s remote past to the present. The myth of *The Mahabharata* serves to
highlight not only the moral, ethical pitfalls but also provokes thinking on that score to
redeem and refashion values of universal human experience in our progressive existence.

As the narrator -protagonist of the novel Ved Vyas (or V.V. Ji) sums up: “History is
Kurukshetra. The struggle between dharma and *adharma* is a struggle of our nation and
each one of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence” (Tharoor 391).

Divided into 18 books on the pattern of the great epic, *The Great Indian Novel*
takes on the entire subcontinent beginning with India under the British in the late 19th and
early 20th centuries down to India in the post-Emergency period. It covers all the major
political and historical events of the 20th century. The historical account, in the novel, is
given principally in the form of an allegory, focusing on three types of exceptional pasts.
The action of the novel seems to flow in three levels — historical past, fictional past and
mythical past. Although they have individual identities, they appear to overlap/
intermingle with one another at many places. Such narrative style has all the chances of
obscurity. But, Tharoor’s skill is unparalleled in the use of its clarity and smooth flow.
His narrator Ved Vyas in a confident tone declares, “…what I am about to dictate is the
definitive memoir of my life and times…. I shall tell of past, present and future, of
existence and passing…of what is, of what was, of what should have been” (18). Thus,
the novel is a historical and political allegory in which Tharoor not only juxtaposes the atmosphere of *The Mahabharata* with that of the modern history, but also amalgamates the two beautifully, though at the cost of taking certain liberties eg. Gangaji represents or “allegorizes” Mahatma Gandhi of the Indian Freedom Struggle or Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*. The action of the novel begins from the time of Gangaji’s emergence on the Indian political scene in the first quarter of the 20th century. The first book “The Twice Born Tale” opens with the narration of V.V., an analogue of the great sage Ved Vyasa, echoing the glorious past of India in the following words:

> They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. I tell them that if they would only read *the Mahabharata* and *the Ramayana*, study the Golden ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas…they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay. (17)

He is looking for an amanuensis for himself. He procures for himself none other than Ganpati whose name and physical features remind one of the great Lord Ganesha, the original amanuensis of Ved Vyasa. V.V. starts from the very beginning of the epic and tells us about Shantanu and Satyavati tying the nuptial knot and Bhishma (Gangaji of *The Great Indian Novel*, who represents Gandhi) taking the terrible vow to practice celibacy for the rest of his life. Chitrangada and Vichitravirya, the sons of Shantanu and Satyavati, die without giving an heir to the Hastinapur throne. For the first time, an event is related to the modern Indian history, when we get to hear about the annexation of a province by the British, in the absence of a legal heir. He also refers to the 1857 revolt. The chapter
ends with the birth of Dhritarashtra whose historical parallel is Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru; Pandu, the historical parallel of Subhash Chandra Bose; and Vidur, Sardar Patel.

The Next book “The Duel with the Crown” opens with another of Gangaji’s resolves, giving up his attire and making comfortable in just a loincloth. An important conversation between two fictional British officials regarding the caste-division in the Indian society leads to the discussion about Gangaji’s increasing popularity, his attitude towards the British Raj and his demand of self-rule or Swaraj. The chapter also tells us about the growing up of the two princes of Hastinapur and Vidur as well. After settling the three into their households, Gangaji makes another proclamation that he shall from now onwards spend most of his time in pursuing the course of Truth. The statement echoes Gandhiji’s declaration to use truth and non-violence for attaining freedom. Tharoor describes Gandhi’s larger than life persona, in a most glorious and precise phrase: “While he was alive, he was impossible to ignore. Once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate” (47). Tharoor moves on to describe the Indian struggle for freedom by narrating the first Satyagrah movement, that Gangaji (Gandhi) started in the fictional village of Motihari, called the Motihari Satyagrah (actually, the Champaran Movement started by Gandhiji). Gangaji on reaching Motihari realizes that the condition of the Indian peasants in Motihari has worsened, as according to the colonial laws, three-tenths of every peasant’s land is to be used up to grow indigo, a cash-crop. Indigo cultivation was, to the British more profitable than wheat. People were starving and to make matters worse, the profit was enjoyed by the British planters as they bought the dye at a fixed price only. Gangaji launches an agitation against indigo plantation that leads to his arrest. He is tried in the court but the way Gangaji presents his case moves the British magistrate
and he drops all charges against Gangaji. The system of indigo plantation is abolished and the planters are ordered to pay compensation to the farmers.

The British officials are baffled by this success of Gangaji, whose ideals of truth and non-violence are beyond their comprehension. To stop this national fervour from spreading further, they order the annexation of Hastinapur. Turning the pages of history we realize that the annexation of Hastinapur was actually the declaration of Rowlatt Act, which stated that any Indian could be arrested without trial. To protest against this Act, which was passed in 1919, Gandhiji decided to hold mass rallies throughout India. In Punjab the event took a very tragic turn. It has been described as the Bibigah Gardens Massacre (actually the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre) in the novel. General Dyer allegorized as General Rudyard, orders his men to open fire on the unarmed crowd which comprised of children, women and elderly citizens. This crowd had gathered for a peaceful demonstration against the Rowlatt Act. In this brutal massacre by General Rudyard hundreds were killed and thousands injured. Tharoor in his interview explains the reason for choosing the name Bibigah Gardens in the following words:

The scene of my retelling of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre is set in the “Bibigah Gardens” a name redolent of the Mutiny, which Paul Scott (author of The Raj Quartet) used as the site of the rape of an English woman in The Jewel in the Crown. My purpose is to suggest that, if rape is to be a metaphor for the colonial connection, it is somewhat strange that the English are victims of it. So I reclaim the name of the Bibigah Gardens for a place where Indians are massacred. (Kreisler)
In the next book, “The Powers of Silence”, Tharoor narrates the incident of the Jute Mill workers, whose rights were being hammered by the mill owners in Bengal. The incident relates with the Ahmedabad mill strike. Here, Gangaji again plays a major role in restoring the rights of the mill workers by following the path of satyagrah. He proposes to fast until things come to normal and their demands fulfilled. In this chapter, the narrator severely satirizes the rich landowners and Zamindars who were busy legitimizing the British rule in India. He even provides us with the most appropriate reason for the coming of the British to India. He argues:

Do you think the merchants and adventurers and traders of the East India Company would have first sailed to a land of poverty and misery? No, Ganpathi, they came to an India that was fabulously rich and prosperous, they came in search of wealth and profit, and they took what they could take, leaving Indians to wallow in their leavings. (95)

In the “Forbidden Fruit”, the real state of affairs of the Kaurava Party, the mythical parallel of the Congress Party and its working is revealed. Tharoor explicate how internal rivalries and tensions in the camp led to the differences of opinion between Pandu who represents S.C. Bose and Dhritrashtara who represents Nehru. The Nehru of the historical past (Dhrirashtra) was a Socialist and was favoured by Gandhi; where as Bose (Pandu) was a hostile revolutionary. Gangaji’s participation in the first Round Table Conference is openly opposed by Pandu, and on the other hand Dhrirtrashtra supports it. The failure of the first Round Table Conference led Gandhiji to announce the starting of the Civil Disobedience movement. Gandhiji protested against the unjust salt tax imposed
by the British by way of Dandi March which Tharoor has named the Great Mango
March. Gandhiji and many important leaders were arrested. The incident of Chauri
Chaura, which Tharoor calls Chaurasta, where a mob of agitated people set fire to a
police station, forced Gandhji to call off this movement of Civil Disobedience.

In the next book “The Son also Rises” Tharoor starts off describing the great
diversity in India due to innumerable castes and cultures existing here. Tharoor also
comments on the British policy of *Divide et imperia*, i.e., Divide and Rule.

*Divide et imperia*, they called it in the language of their own Roman conquerors
— divide and rule. Stress, elevate, sanctify and exploit the differences amongst
your subjects, and you can reign over them forever — or for as near to ever as
makes no difference. (134-135)

The Morley–Minto reforms in 1907 legalized the system of separate electorates
for Muslims and Hindus. Separate electorates definitely promoted separate parties for
Muslims and Hindus. Muslim League had already been formed under the guidance of Sir
Syed Ahmed Khan. In this very chapter Tharoor narrates the arrival and the rise of
Mohammad Ali Karna (actually Mohammad Ali Jinnah), his antagonism to the Kaurava
Party (Congress), his irreverence to Gangaji and the rebuilding of the Muslim League in
1936 on an invitation from Gaga Shah (Agha Khan), one of the fanatics. The National
fervour that Karna earlier had, as a member of the Kaurava Party, is now swallowed by
the fires of Communalism. Finally, Karna’s new slogan is ‘Independence without Hindu
domination’ that is, the demand for a separate Muslim nation, Karnistan (Pakistan) (148).
The next book “Midnight’s Parents” tells us the tales of growing up of the Pandavas as well as Dhritrashtra’s only daughter, Priya Duryodhani, who, like her father, in the coming years was to develop a keen sense of observation and insight which would take her places. The letters that her father writes to her from jail are a great source of inspiration for her. But, her national fervour is different from her father’s. She is more of a tyrant. Tharoor also describes Pandu’s formation of the Onward Organization (Forward Block) in the wake of his losing the Kaurava Party’s Presidency as part of the manipulations of Dhritrashtra and unbelievably Gangaji. Pandu makes haste for Germany to meet the Fuhrer. Later, he seeks Japanese aid to broadcast his radio messages. Meanwhile, the Second World War breaks out and the British decide to engage Indian soldiers in fighting against the Nazi forces. Gangaji (Gandhiji) in protest raises the call of ‘Quit India’. After the War is over the British realize that their grip over India is loosening and now they would have to hand over the country to its people. But before leaving they gift India with the last offering of communalism. They decide to divided India into two — India and Karnistan (Pakistan).

“Renunciation — Or, the Bed of Arrows” brings us to the end of the colonial rule in India. India’s last Viceroy, Viscount Drewpad (Lord Mountbatten) announces the day of Indian Independence, which is 15th August 1947, as also the division of India. Bipan Chandra in his book, *India’s Struggle for Independence 1857 – 1947*, comments on the contrast between Gandhi’s and Nehru’s feelings at the dawn of Independence. He says: “Gandhiji’s prayers were reflective of the goings on in the dark: the murders, abductions and rapes, Nehru’s eyes were on the light on the horizon, the new dawn, the birth of a free India” (504). The following chapters describe the crisis, the newly -born state of
India undergoes under India’s first Premier Dhritrashtara (Nehru). The problems that arise after Independence are, the accession of princely states to India, the issue of accession of Manimir (Kashmir), the invasion of Manimir by Karnistani forces, so on and so forth. Vidur, who represents Sardar Patel, makes a great contribution to the Indian democracy by integrating hundreds of states. Tharoor, also comments on the disputable state of Kashmir. He says:

So Manimir remained condemned to the label of ‘disputed territory’ ….. To this day it is scarred by tank tracks, amputated by cease-fire lines, exploited by rhetoricians and fanatics on both sides of the frontier who prostitute its name for their own meretricious purposes. (260)

Tharoor, also describes the Indo-Pak war of 1948, Nehru’s first political blunder by taking the problem to the UN Security Council, the ceasefire declared on December 31, 1948 and also Nehru’s policy of Non-Alignment and the signing of Panch Sheel treaty with China in 1954. The author also narrates the story, how Kanika Menon, the Defence Minister of India, persuades Dhritrashtra (Nehru) to take Comeo (Goa) by force from the Portuguese, which was taken as an example by China, who invaded India in 1962. Nehru could not bear this breach of trust and collapsed due to a heart-attack. After Dhritrashtra, Shishu Pal (historical parallel of Lal Bahadur Shastri) becomes the Prime Minister of India. Again, there is a detailed description of the second Indo-Pak War in 1965 and the ceasefire between Shastri and General Ayub Khan of Pakistan in Tashkent. Shastri died in Tashkent of a heart attack. After Shishu Pal, the most obvious choice is Priya Duryodhani (the allusion appears to be towards Indira Gandhi as she was known as
Priyadarshini Indira. She has politics in her blood and the quality to lead but she turns out to be a tyrant and makes democracy her personal domain.

In the next chapter, “The Bungle Book — Or, the Reign of Error”, Tharoor concentrates on how Indira Gandhi manipulated Indian Politics to make everything move according to her wishes. Draupadi Mokrasi born out of the illicit union between Dhritrashtra (Nehru) and Edwina (Mountbatten) quite possibly is the personification of Indian democracy. The fourth general elections saw the oust of Congress. Yudhishtir, who represents Morarji Desai, is made the Deputy Prime Minister. Tharoor describes the state of democracy thus: “And Draupdi Mokrasi, running a fever, took to bed complaining of alternating hot flushes and chills…” (343).

There arises discontentment against Duryodhani in the Congress which leads to the split of the party into Congress R for Requisitionists under the leadership of Duryodhani and Congress (O) for Organization, dominated by Yudhishtir (Desai) and other leaders known as the Syndicate. The Syndicate leaders propose the name of Sanjeeva Reddy, who is supposedly Tharoor’s narrator Ved Vyas or V.V. for the President’s post which had fallen vacant following the death of President Zakir Hussain. Duryodhani, meanwhile along with Ashwatthama finalizes the decision of the nationalization of banks. Yudhishtir has to resign and he and other leaders wait for V.V. to win the presidential elections. With Duryodhani’s manipulations, she gets elected Eklavya, (the historical parallel of V.V. Giri) as the president. This is a direct attack on the growing corruption and disinterest of the political leaders in the welfare of the masses. Tharoor, also mentions that in 1971, Duryodhani helps East Karnistan to gain
independence from West Karnistan to form GalebiDesh (Bangladesh). In 1972 general elections, Indira Gandhi won with a massive sweep but due to rise in corruption, threat to land reforms, she lost her popularity. A mass scale revolution is started by Drona (Jaya Prakash Narayan) in Bihar against Duryodhani’s corrupt practices. He demands her resignation. The only way she could think out of this crisis is the proclamation of emergency (called “the Siege” in the novel). This is how the decline of Duryodhani started. In the next elections she loses and Janta Government comes to power. Tharoor’s intentions are perhaps clear i.e. as Draupadi was humiliated by Duryodhan at Yudhishtir’s court, similarly, Democracy was exploited by Mrs. Gandhi.

Tharoor, in this novel not only debunks the colonizers but also the entire ruling class. He does not eulogize the past or the present but brings the reality of the period of colonization to the surface. His postcolonial attitude of dismantling and subverting the colonial paradigms, beliefs, practices and notions is clearly visible throughout the novel. He says:

This story, like that of our country, is a story of betrayed expectations. Our democrats gamble with democracy; our would-be dictators do not know what to dictate: We soothe ourselves with the lullabies of our ancient history, our remarkable culture, and our inspiring mythology. But our present is so depressing that our rulers can only speak of the intermediate future – or the immediate past. (411)

Despite the fact that the contemporary history provides a very depressing spectacle, Tharoor has posited the ancient Indian concept of dharma as a value in the
reconstruction of the past. This seems to be his most valuable contribution to Indian history. *Dharma* looms large over the narrative, informing all its components especially characterization and theme. A discussion in the last chapter of the novel, “The Path to Salvation”, highlights the importance of sticking to values at any price. Dharma, the father of Yudhishtir, tells him, “If there is one great Indian principle that has been handed down through the ages, it is that of the paramount importance of practicing dharma at any price. Life itself is worthless without dharma. Only dharma is eternal” (417).

For Tharoor, dharma, or the ancient practice of following the righteous path is synonymous to India. If dharma is eternal, so is India. Taking a cyclical view of history, he declares:

> History…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 recreated…each hour, each day, each week, going through the unending process of birth and rebirth, which has made us all. India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again. India is forever, and India is forever being made. (225)

Tharoor’s effortless rendition of the most complex situations as a parody of earlier events leaves us under the impression that India’s best is not behind her, but is constantly being updated. This attitude of the author is far from being defeatist. Tharoor takes up the challenge of re-telling the *Mahabharata* in the light of the twentieth-century political India. The ancient Indian story reflects faithfully the real Indian consciousness. Tharoor in “Yoking Myth to History” writes, “In the sense, my novel is about the kind of stories a
society tells about itself. In many cultures, myths and epics both contribute to and reflect the national consciousness…” (5). He models his novel, as admitted by him in the Afterword of his novel, on the pattern of the ancient Indian epic because Mahabharata remains a “perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India.” Thematically speaking his novel deals with divisions and conflicts that constitute the history of the nation from its remote past to the present by relying on memory and using oral form of narration. The Great Indian Novel aims to achieve a correspondence between myth and reality and uses a hybrid mode combining history, myth, autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, verse, etc. Tharoor has consistently endeavored to experiment with the exploration of Indian culture and history in his works. India holds his attention and when asked in an interview about the aim of his writing, he stated: “Both to reveal myself to India, and to reveal India to myself, but also to reveal India to Indians and other readers around the world. I found… my conscious desire to reinvent and come to terms with India.” Thus it can be said that Tharoor is enmeshed in India’s culture and history at various levels which is evidently reflected through his works and there is hardly any doubt regarding ‘Indianness’ of the author or his works.
Works cited:


