Chapter 4

Dynamics of Demythification

Post-Independence India showed a growing westernization, individualism, homogenization of culture and the emergence of a bourgeois perspective, indicative of a cultural transformation which seems to sensitize many contemporary writers to confront them through their works of art that take on a subversive version. Shashi Tharoor, through re-construction and subversion of the master narrative of the nation *The Mahabharata*, has proved himself a successful challenger of conventional literary tradition. Being a luminant member of the group called ‘Rushdie’s Children’, he rocked the academe with the publication of the monumental work *The Great Indian Novel* which produced ripples among the Indian intelligentsia. The novel is a re-creation of the ancient epic, *The Mahabharata* in contemporary terms. Interestingly enough, tradition itself is used as a model method to defy tradition by the novelist.

Tharoor superimposes the political history of contemporary India on the epic structure of *The Mahabharata* and together both narratives straddle forward to enshrine a holistic portrayal of
India’s cultural heritage. He demythifies the epic and strips off its heroic grandeur in order to make it befit to the post-Independence political situation of India. He fictionalizes the traditional poetic epic and synthesizes it with the contemporary politics in order to present the twentieth-century Indian political history. The historical characters in the book are easily identified with the political personages of modern India. Ayyappa Panicker comments:

It is a strange vision of contemporary India retold in the garb of the ancient tale of story-telling. Here is narratology contributing directly, unashamedly, to the art of the narrative. The saga of the Kauravas and the Pandavas provides the tapestry which when looked at from another angle slowly reveals the lineaments of a super-imposed narrative of national life: the work is a deconstruction veritable of Vyasa’s epic *Mahabharata*-hence great India(n) novel. (67)

Tharoor seems to be inspired by P. Lal’s version of the great epic titled *The Mahabharata of Vyasa* (1968). The formal narrative structure of Tharoor’s novel metaphorically parallels the ancient epic both in its mode and methodology. He attempts to re-write, rather re-present the already written. Ved Vyas, the narrator-protagonist of the novel clarifies in the beginning that he is going to 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” (TGIN 18).

The adaptation of the framework of the great epic itself is capable of arresting the attention of readers. The connection of Tharoor’s novel with the epic *The Mahabharata* enhances its chances of readability and impact on popular imagination. The epic is considered as the fountainhead and storehouse of all knowledge and what is not in *The Mahabharata* is nowhere to be found. Tharoor ingeniously correlates the episodes in the epic with the characters and incidents in the twentieth-century Indian politics. The author can be said to have discovered an apt metaphor and strategy for his depiction of the contemporary politics. The efficacy with which the political scenario of India is superimposed over the politico-religious struggle of the ancient epic excites interest. Tharoor got the freedom to write; as it were, his own version of the epic, which he partially does. He twists and tampers with the events and characters in the epic to meet his fictional needs. The author makes a judicious juxtaposition of the ancient and modern setting and characters, there by creating a passage between the two. This is made plausible by the careful manipulation of various stylistic strategies. The vast canvas of *The Mahabharata* with its innumerable characters, plots and subplots provided Tharoor with a congenial ground for experimenting with new fictional techniques.
Like Rushdie and Vijayan, Tharoor too violated all conventional canons of writing and employed fresh methods of demystification. *The Great Indian Novel* stands testimony to his successful implementation of fictional tactics like satire, parody, irony, metafiction, humour, symbolism etc. He demythified the very myth itself and deftly used it as a demystifying agent. If Rushdie is a juggler of words, Tharoor could be considered as a juggler of myths. With sophistication and compelling wilfulness, the novelist used the resources of fiction for providing his vision of the past by working out different mixtures of fantasy and myth. Tharoor has filtered the contemporary history through a dense cover of comedy, critiquing it through the satirical frame or representing it through the rational construct of allegory.

With great ingenuity Tharoor invokes; uses and subverts the socio–political, religious, literary and cultural myths of the country thereby deconstructing and dismantling the fundamental traditional assumptions. The demythification is done with a view to questioning and to exposing the underlying imperialist structures. The heroic figures are burlesqued and caricatured in a totally satiric manner. Rushdie had the conviction that the political history of Pakistan could be fictionalized only through tragedy and farce as in his *Shame*. Similarly, Tharoor too felt that the history of India could be refracted only through a satirical lens. He puts the
mythic characters in a modern setting and makes a sarcastic commentary on the political episodes and personalities of modern India. The elasticity of the epic narrative helps the author to incorporate a large numbers of incidents, which are not necessary for its historical design.

True to the narrative design of the epic, Tharoor too begins his account from the time of the birth of the narrator-Ved Vyas. He strictly adheres to the chronological events in the epic; the affair of King Shantanu and Satyavati, the great vow of Bhishma, the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, Vidur and so on. Almost all the epic characters and incidents are mentioned, some twisted or compressed for fictional purposes.

Tharoor’s version of the historical account begins roughly from the time when Gandhiji entered Indian politics to the time Indira Gandhi returned to power after the fall of the Janata Government. The nightmarish experience of the country during the Emergency period in the history of free India revived the memory of the battle of Kurukshetra, making a realization that the contemporary Indian reality can be understood only in relation to the myths and legends of India’s remote past. By accepting diversity alone, the novelist believes, India in future can escape from the mistakes of the past. The political message of unity in diversity is evident when Tharoor
writes: “Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one dharma . . .” (TGIN 418).

The use of The Mahabharata myth for portraying the rumblings of the contemporary society was an innovative technique by the novelist. Tharoor gives a modern colouring to the antique lore. Here, the aesthetics of subversion works through a complicated embedding of one tale into another, which itself may have been interwoven into another. Though myth belongs to the cultural tradition of a nation, it is not factually verifiable. Finding connections between myth and reality is a characteristic habit of the Indian mind. Ashis Nandy recognizes the inherent centrality of tradition possessed by the Indian society when he comments:

In societies like India, where tradition is central, over powering and vital, no writer can avoid grappling with tradition, regardless of whether he sees himself to be made or to be doomed by his past. (47)

Readers who are familiar with The Mahabharata myth can solve the puzzles posed in The Great Indian Novel easily and quickly. Tharoor uses the mythic setting of the ancient epic to foreground the eternal presence, which substantiates the continuance of the historical process from India’s remote past to the present. The demythification of the epic suggests that the political events of this age assume epic dimensions. Hence, the novel is populated by
“... contemporary characters transported incongruously through time to their oneiric mythological settings” (TGIN 355). P. Balaswamy comments on the myth in the novel:

Tharoor’s mythic vehicle has been so tantalizingly used here that it provides him the same freedom, the same provisionality, and eclecticism that multiple intertextuality would have given. (230-231)

Tharoor’s Ved Vyasa, similar to his epic counterpart narrates the story to his amanuensis Ganapathi. The narrator becomes the spokes-person of the author through whom he addresses issues relating to political discourse. The narrator is not just a sutradhar or a choric figure as used in classic Sanskrit or Greek plays nor is he merely a first person narrative device employed in realistic fiction. He symbolizes the authorial involvement with the reader in the true postmodernist way of writing.

Almost all mythic characters are demythified by Tharoor to create a ring of contemporaneity in the ancient myth. The mythical aura of Lord Ganapathi is subverted when he is described as having “elephantine tread” and “broad forehead” (TGIN 18). Tharoor’s Ganapathi is just a dim-witted stenographer employed by Ved Vyasa, the narrator to take down his dictations.
Some of the most venerable names in Hindu myths and legends figure as characters in this modern epic. Tharoor had to make changes and adjustments of various kinds in order to fit the actual historical personages and events into the narrative design and cast of characters of the epic. The author himself records:

. . . the yoking of myth to history restricted some of my fictional operations: as the novel progressed, I was obliged to abandon novelistic conventions and develop characters who were merely walking metaphors. ("Yoking" 7)

Krishna who occupies a dominant role in the ancient epic is a reduced and relegated figure; a demythified form of his original grand status, in Tharoor’s version of the epic. He is devoid of any mythical halo around him and he does not have to play a serious role in the course of the novel as well. He appears as Dr. Krishna Parthasarathy, a small town MLA who is also a friend of Arjun. He even performs the ritual of giving a short spiritual discourse to Arjun. When both Yudhistir and Priya Duryodhani seek his support before the onset of the battle, which is projected in the novel as an electoral contest, Krishna says as he does in the original epic:

So let me propose this: one side can have me, alone, not as a candidate, with no party funds, but fully committed to their campaign; the other can have the massed ranks of my party workers, disciplined and dedicated men and women who will
heed my instructions to work with undiminished vigour even if they see me on the other side. (TGIN 392)

Tharoor has used excessive license in the characterization of Draupadi. He subverts the mythical image of the epic Draupadi and gives her a contemporary colouring. There is not much in common between the Draupadi of the epic and Tharoor’s Draupadi. She is presented as having a mixed parentage; the product of the illicit union of Dhritarashtra-Nehru and Lady Georgina Drewpad, wife of Viscound Drewpad who presided over the partition of the country. Regarding the bizarre liberties taken by Tharoor, N. Eakambaram and Geetha K. remark:

It must be remembered that Tharoor’s novel works with the political happenings in India, reaching out for parallels to The Mahabharata and not the other way around. This necessarily means that events preceding and succeeding Independence have to be dwelt upon, and the innumerable incidents of The Mahabharata that cannot be integrated or ignored have to be clumsily got over in dreams or nightmares like Gangaji’s bed of arrows, or the game of dice. (79-80)

Tharoor is trying to build a dazzling bridge between the major events of India’s traditional mythology and contemporary history thereby offering new insights into both. He has worked out a reasonable degree of semblance between the mythical and the
historical. Hence, *The Great Indian Novel* is an attempt to deconstruct the mythical-political text of India. Tharoor skilfully demythifies *The Mahabharata* by deglamourizing it and making it suit the pedestrian politics of the twentieth-century India. Tharoor realized that the epic trappings are not appropriate to portray the murky and stinking political realities of postcolonial India.

The novel also explores the importance of myth as a source of inspiration and as theme for creative writing even in the modern world. By adopting the mythic framework of *The Mahabharata*, Tharoor aims at stating that the contemporary world is yet another *Mahabharata* with all its vicissitudes and emotions. The juxtaposition of the ancient and the modern realities result in the discrediting of the mythic characters. T. N. Dhar rightly records:

> The variegated nature of the epic, with its loose, episodic structure, due to its multiple levels of accretion, provided Tharoor with another freedom: to try and use a wide range of stylistic variations in his narrative, which he has exploited cleverly for critiquing historical personages and events. (*"Entering History"* 211)

Satire is a major fictional technique that Tharoor devises to retell the story of the Indian political situation. He refracts the modern history of India through a satiric prism. His satirical vehicle is full of several forms of irreverent style; puns, word play,
light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, playful stories and witty digressions. The satirical vein is employed in the portrayal of almost all the characters. The use of satire is an added licence to the author by which he could assault everyone. Tharoor subjects the dominant political persons of independent India to extreme satirical treatment by giving them an allegorical garb of the mythical characters. The satirical punch is evident right from the beginning. The narrator-protagonist opens the narration with the words:

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. (TGIN 17)

These lines set the tone of the novel. Tharoor’s satire is devoid of grudge or malice, instead one could feel a pleasant humour in everything he satirizes. Gandhiji viz. Ganga Datta too becomes a victim of Tharoor’s satiric glare though he has done it in a very benevolent manner. In spite of the high placement of Gangaji in the novel, Tharoor does not have any scruples in mentioning the amusing aspects of his personality and thinking. Humorous
references are there about his habit of enemas, sanitary preoccupations, fasting and love for the cow:

People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loincloth. ‘Excuse me, I was just preparing myself an enema, he would say, with a feeble smile, as if that explained everything. (TGIN 35)

References are also there of Gandhiji’s bewildering diversity of reading- *The Vedas, Manu, The Bible, The Gita, Ruskin, Tolstoy* etc. Tharoor satirically comments on the extraordinary behaviour of Ganga Dutta-Gandhi, which he attributes to the wide range of philosophical reading:

His manner had grown increasingly other-worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane, and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment (TGIN 26)

Almost all characters are given a sarcastic treatment by the novelist. Tharoor’s sarcasm leaves its blunt terrain for a while when he mentions about the religious divisions in the country. He refers to the water-vendors in a crowded third class railway carriage shouting, “*Hindupani! Mussulman pani!*” (TGIN 49), since in those days even water had a religion. The portrayal of Kunti is also done
in a satiric way. She is presented as a fashionable lady who smokes expensive Turkish cigarettes and her Banaras sari, Bombay nails, Bangalore sandals and Bareilly bangles all advertised her fabled elegance and sophistication. This depiction of Kunti is a complete deviation from her mythical counterpart. This absolute subversion of the mythical image of Kunti is made for fictional purposes.

*The Great Indian Novel* is principally an allegorical piece of work though the novelist does not mention it specifically inside or outside the novel. Besides the novel’s superficial fictional significance is contrived to signify a second underlying order of things and events. In fact, Tharoor is attempting to re-construct the political history of the twentieth-century India through a fictional re-casting of characters, events and episodes from *The Mahabharata*. A re-definition of the Indian reality is intended through explorations of the past and the re-creation of the present. Some characters and events are to be understood for the way they have been presented and others for the things they represent. Tharoor taxes his readers with the job of finding out parallels between the literal and emblematic models and to grasp their hidden implications.

Due to the special characteristics of the towering master-text *The Mahabharata*, the allegorical framework adopted equips
Tharoor with myriad advantages. Tharoor handles political allegory with considerable finesse and felicity. T. N. Dhar opines:

*The Mahabharata* is an appropriate text for writing any account which centres around themes and concerns which are at the heart of Tharoor’s rendition of the history of India: power, politics, schisms, personality-clashes, institutional structures, individual and social dharma, etc. (“Entering History” 210)

The narrator protagonist Ved Vyas, commences his story with the birth of Ganga Dutta-Bhishma who quite obviously an allegorical metaphor of Mahatma Gandhi. Bhishma becomes the grand sire of the Kuru dynasty, the iron-willed man who swore and lived by his famous vow of celibacy. Gandhiji like Gangaji played the role of elder statesman in contemporary India, similar to the role of Bhishma in *The Mahabharata* who steered and guided the destinies of the royal progeny of Hastinapur. He serves as a major nexus between the past and the present. An extreme parallelism is established between Gandhiji and Ganga Dutta by focusing on the terrible vow of celibacy, his agony at the time of partition and finally the brutal assassination. Both figures carry with them an aura of sagely reverence. Both Gandhiji and Ganga Dutta gave up their respective claims to the power and governance of the country.
The assassination of Bhishma by Shikhandin allegorically refers to the assassination of Gandhi by Godse.

The allegorical structure of the novel gets more and more crowded as the novel advances. Dhritarashtra, the blind ruler of Hastinapur is depicted as a parallel of Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of India. The author uses enough subjectivity in the portrayal of Dhritarashtra. He gives a negative colouring to the character of Dhritarashtra and accuses him severely for his vaulting ambition and monumental ego. He “. . . was a fine looking young fellow, slim, of aquiline nose and aristocratic bearing” (TGIN 41). His English education gave him only “. . . a formidable vocabulary and the vaguely abstracted manner of the over-educated” (TGIN 41). His blindness is used to a trenchant metaphoric effect: “He had the blind man’s gift of seeing the world not as it was, but as he wanted it to be” (TGIN 85). The narrator ironically comments: “. . . what might have happened had he been able to see the world around him as the rest of us can. Might India’s history have been different today?” (TGIN 41) The novelist unleashes his repugnance of the selfish and insensible politicians through the persona of Dhritarashtra. Tharoor indicts him severely for the hasty manner in which he dealt with the partition of India. He further whips Nehru for conspiring with Lord Mount Batten and his charming wife Edwina. His amatory liaison with her also comes into severe attack and
charges him for having failed to see that she was used by her husband as his “secret weapon” (TGIN 215). The narrative implies that with the blessings of Gandhi, Nehru succeeded in attaining the reins of power in post-Independence scenario of India. Tharoor seems to be suggesting that history is blind like Dhritarashtra and therefore it keeps repeating its mistakes.

Similarly, enough physical details coupled with known historical events make up the re-writing of the role of Subhash Chandra Bose as the pale faced Pandu. Tharoor’s allegorical pen makes him wear little roundish glasses that gave him the appearance of a Bengali teacher or a “Japanese admiral” (TGIN 42). Pandu in the novel, true to his mythical counterpart, rebels against the authority of Gangaji and decides to strike it alone by fleeing to Germany and Japan. Tharoor sketches Pandu as one who could have changed the history of India, had he not been betrayed both at home and abroad. He is depicted as the true representative of a political leader having good intentions, but was unable to manage to the top due to numerous unforeseen reasons. The garb of Yudhistir was given to Morarji Desai by the author. There are obtrusive references to his bizarre auto-urine therapy.

Next contender for power was Karna who reminds us of Muhammed Ali Jinnah. Nevertheless, the circumstances of his birth prevented him from coming to the forefront though he
eventually became successful in taking away a part from the country to set up the state of Karnistan which stands for Pakistan. Jinnah’s dislike of Gandhi’s ways and thinking also finds its echoes in the novel when Tharoor says:

Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of a Hindu. The Mahaguru’s traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient texts, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealized pre-British past that Karna did not believe in (and was impatient with)-all this made the young man mistrustful of the Great Teacher. (TGIN 142)

The author had to make several adjustments in the distribution of narrative space among the people and events. Some deviations from the original also became inevitable. Hence, Yudhistir, Arjun, Bhim, Nakul and Sahadev together allegorically stand for the press, army, bureaucracy and foreign exchange. Tharoor deftly mixes human beings with institutions in the case of Pandavas, which was yet another demystification technique. He categorizes them to be the protectors of democracy represented through Draupadi. Democracy is allegorized in the character of Draupadi. Through her marriage to Arjun, Draupadi is shared by his other brothers who personify “. . . the hopes and the limitations of each of the national institutions they served . . .” (TGIN 319).
Tharoor employs the postmodernist technique of changing the genders in the case of Priya Duryodhani who is equivalent to thousand Kauravas. Obviously, the author is referring to Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The fact that she equals the whole of Kaurava clan suggests that she is as strong as thousand men. She tries her best to keep the Pandavas away from the seats of power and devices stratagems even to finish them off. Tharoor prepares the readers for a negative portrait of Mrs. Gandhi by using animal imagery to describe the scene of her birth which is suggestive of the brutality and oppression of her times:

It was a baby’s cry and yet it was more than that; it was a rare, sharp, high-pitched cry like that of a donkey in heat, as it echoed around the house a sound started up outside as if in response, a weird, animal moan, and then the sounds grew, as donkeys brayed in the distance, mares neighed in their pens, jackals howled in the forests, and through the cacophony we heard the beating of wings at the windows, the caw-caw-cawing of a cackle of crows, and penetrating through the shadows, the piercing shriek of the hooded vultures circling above the palace of Hastinapur. (TGIN 73)

Ved Vyas, the narrator who is not a passive observer of the political imbroglio could be either Rajagopalachari, the Governor General or Neelam Sanjiva Reddy. Jaya Prakash Narayan is given
the portfolio of Drona in the epic. He is depicted as providing moral support to the protecting pillars of Indian democracy but his complicated thinking proved his undoing. Sardar Patel is allegorized as Vidur, Godse as Amba-Shikhandi and so on. The list of political personalities vying to be recognized as a particular character is exhaustive. The allegorical background is developed more as a parallel to modern times than as a contrast by the author. The extravagant pantomime is inhabited by innumerable mythical characters who are ingeniously paralleled with the twentieth-century Indian political figures, though the comparison seems to be too farfetched and round about.

Apart from characterization, a large number of incidents of contemporary India also find room in the narrative design of the novel. Paralleling the Dandi March, the Mango March is sketched in a pure mock-heroic way. The defeat of Hidimba by Bhima is used as a parallel for the liberation of Goa from the Portuguese rule; the tearing off the body of Jarasandh into two by Bhima reflects the dismembering of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh and so on. The humiliating defeat of India in the Indo-China war is hinted in the replacement of Bhima by Sahadeva in the original episode of Bhim-Bakasura wrestling match.

The perpetual battle between *dharma* and *adharma* that has been a continuous process from the epic times is allegorized in the
struggle for India’s freedom, in the depiction of the misrule of Mrs. Gandhi and also in the imposition of Emergency. M. K. Chaudhury rightly points out:

Tharoor uses parallelism as a defamiliarizing technique for the purpose of modifying the usual perception of the political personalities and issues not only of the modern India but also those of the epic age. . . . By using parallelism as an irradiating medium, the novel tries to underline the truth, ‘history is Kurukshetra.’ (113)

The supreme testimony of the judicious implementation of parallelism is evident in the very title of the novel itself. In Sanskrit Maha means great and Bharata means India, hence The Great Indian Novel. The eighteen books of the novel are planned as parallels to the eighteen cantos of Vyasa’s epic. The title names of each chapter are taken from famous literary works written against the Indian backdrop. A few instances are; ‘The Duel with the Crown.’, ‘The Twice-born Tale’, ‘The Midnight’s Parents’, ‘Passages through India’, ‘A Raj Quartet’ etc. Regarding the parallelism of Tharoor, M. F. Salat comments:

The metaphoric parallelism is so dexterously managed that both the narrative, the ancient epical and the modern Indian, run together in such simultaneity that one gets the impression the narrative of modern India is, in effect, a replay
of the ancient epical one. One almost feels that the epic poet was not exaggerating in claiming the *Mahabharata* to be the be all and end all of all conceivable knowledge. (129-30)

Symbolism is another demystifying strategy that Tharoor successfully employs in the novel. The most significant one is that of Draupadi who stands for democracy. The marriage of Draupadi and Arjuna is given a modern meaning by presenting it as a union of democracy and the voice of the people, the Press. Through this marriage she was shared by the four brothers of Arjun. In Yudhistir the Legislature and Judiciary combine; Bhim stands for Armed Forces, and Nakul and Sahadev for the bureaucracy. Collectively they represent the four pillars of democracy and they are supposed to protect democracy from all sorts of external threats. The disrobing of Draupadi is symbolic of the denuding of Indian democracy by Mrs. Gandhi when she declared the state of Emergency. During that period, Draupadi’s health fails and she was abused even at home, which directly points to the weakening of democratic structures during the infamous time. The compression of the idea of democratic principles into a character was an imaginative demystifying stratagem adopted by Tharoor.

The novel rises to metafictional excellence in being a commentary on the art of storytelling as well as a story on its own merits. The novel itself is a testament of historiographic
metafiction. A historiographic metafiction is considered as an inverted yet improved model of the conventional historical novel. The multiple narrative strands of the novel are meticulously manipulated to create a fascinating dialectic between history and fiction. These categories of novels tend to close the gap between the past and the present and desire to re-write the past in an altogether new context.

A writer of historical fiction selects, organizes and interprets the historical material within a particular socio-political and cultural context. There is a constant self-conscious probing of the art of fictionalization. A historiographic metafiction is an amalgam of history and fiction. It subverts the fictionality of fiction and the historicity of history thereby producing a complex mixture of both. *The Great Indian Novel* problematizes history by portraying historical events and personalities in order to subvert them. It re-creates or re-presents the past in fiction. The novel therefore ceases to be ordinary fiction and is transformed into historiographic metafiction where the novelist uses history as a base and re-visits the past with objectivity and irony.

The intertextuality of Tharoor’s novel takes off with its title itself since it adapts and adopts the name of the ancient epic, *The Mahabharata*. He skilfully blends the Kurukshetra battle in the epic text and the twentieth-century political imbroglio of India. The
choice of *Mahabharata* as the master text provided the author with immense space in incorporating the themes, concerns and also his disillusionment with the post-Independence political situation of India. Upon the foundation of history, Tharoor builds up a dramatic extravaganza with a contemporary cast of political characters for a serious and ironical re-consideration and re-presentation of recent Indian history. Hence, it gets elevated from being an ordinary fiction to the level of historiographic metafiction.

The epic *Mahabharata* lacks a definite text, which provided the author with excessive freedom to use his imagination in its full bloom. The subversion of the epic framework has been meaningfully, creatively and freely done. Ayyappa Panicker posits:

This self-irony and self-mockery on the part of Vyasa-Tharoor in a way provides an indirect justification for all the liberties the author has taken with the plots and characters of the *Mahabharata* and of modern Bharata. The inter-penetration of the past and the present is accepted by the readers because of the author’s disclaimer that he is telling the old story exactly as in a translation. . . . Whatever inter-textuality is preserved between the epic and the novel is sustained by the creative irreverence of the reteller seeking justification and support from the archetypal narrator of the epic himself. (69)
The presence of a narrator and a listener in the true metafictional way help to create the dynamic situation that is essential in a story telling session. The narrator of the story is Ved Vyas and the scribe is Ganapathi, as the epic has it. The whole narration is done in first person with countless intrusions by the narrator Ved Vyas. The digression during which the narrator addresses issues relating to historical process is a diplomatic technique by the author to communicate his own views and ideas. For instance:

Ah, Ganapathi, I see I disappoint you once more. The old man going off the point again, I see you think; how tiresome he can be when he gets philosophical. Do you know what ‘philosophical’ means, Ganapathi? (TGIN 163)

Tharoor adheres strictly to true metafictional tradition as he writes about writing the written. The postmodernist metafiction employs many demystifying tactics like intertextuality, open-endedness, subjectivity, provisionality, indeterminacy, discontinuity, irony, self-reflexivity etc. Tharoor has expertly applied most of these strategies in his novel and has come out with flying colours.

There are many emotionally charged occasions like the victory of non-violence under the leadership of Gangaji, the aftermath of the partition in 1947, the cruelties of the Emergency time etc. when the otherwise controlled narrator exhibits greater degree of self-
reflexivity in his eloquence. Towards the fag end of the story, the narrator broods in a philosophical mood:

I have been, on the whole, a good Hindu in my story. I have portrayed a nation in struggle but omitted its struggles against itself, ignoring the regionalists and autonomists and separatists and secessionists who even today are trying to tear the country apart. To me, Ganapathi, they are of no consequence in the story of India; they seek to diminish something that is far greater than they will ever comprehend.

(TGIN 412)

The narrator in a typical metafictional manner constantly draws attention to the fictive/fictional nature of his story/history and implicates the reader in the fiction-making process. Unlike the realistic writing; Tharoor brings the narrator, the subject and the medium into the same imaginative field of interaction. This he does by breaking down the conventional barriers between the author and the reader. The interaction between the narrator and his amanuensis, which is a constant feature of the narration, assures reader-participation in the fictional process and thereby asserts the involvement of the readers in the development of the thematic structure of the novel. From the olden times, the Indian story-teller has involved the reader by dwelling at length on the conditions and problems of telling his story.
Since history is a collective entity, the writer of a historiographic metafiction confronts the Herculean task of incorporating innumerable characters into the narrative design of fiction. He has to make judicious editions and omissions in order to present a polished product. Tharoor solves this problem by making his narrator remark on the difference between history and life:

If life were a play the noises offstage, and for that matter the sounds of the audience, would drown out the lines of principal actors. That, of course, would make for a rather poor tale; and so the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood. (TGIN 109)

An anticipatory bail is also taken by the author for the events and characters which are left out, by making Ved Vyas mentions about his faltering memory. The metafictional devices used by the author enables the readers to recognize the fictional nature of history and the historiography, and it helps them to make a meaningful distinction between history and fiction.

The naming of the characters is another enormous task that Tharoor had faced. He takes extreme liberty in allotting character names to historical personages. The most blatant one was that of the compression of the entire Kaurava clan into just one Priya
Duryodhani, that too with a different gender. Besides, Tharoor makes Yudhistir share the throne with Duryodhani for sometime which is unthinkable in the original. The epic Yudhistir is poles apart from Tharoor’s version of Yudhistir allegorized as Moraji Desai. The epic Drona sided with Duryodhana but his modern counterpart fights against Priya Duryodhani. There are a few anachronisms as well. The death of Gangaji before he witnesses the disrobing of Draupadi is one among them. Thus, Tharoor makes a brilliant manipulation of events and characters for fictional purposes; in his metafictional narrative, reaching out for parallels in ancient epic.

To overcome the problem of fitting some key events from the epic into the chronological frame of the historical account, Tharoor transforms them into dream sequences. He utilizes the possibilities of dreams in his penchant for problematizing history. The numerous events in The Mahabharata that could not be incorporated were presented roughly in the form of dreams. The disrobing of Draupadi and the ascent of Yudhistir are supreme examples of the use of dream technique. By including these scenes; the narrative achieves the magnitude, solidity and digressive quality of the original. The dream strategy is used eloquently in the last episode of Yudhistir’s ‘Great March’. The entire conversation between Yudhistir and Dharma regarding the importance of virtue
and righteousness in one’s life is presented in the form of a dream. Immediately after this dream of Yudhistir, Ved Vyas too wakes up. He says:

I woke up, Ganapathi, to today’s India. To our land of computers and corruption, of myths and politicians and boxwallahs with moulded plastic briefcases. To an India beset with uncertainties muddling chaotically through to the twenty-first century. (TGIN 418)

The use of dream and fantasy is a metafictional device of subversion. The narrator Ved Vyas declares: “Sometimes, Ganapathi, dreams enable you to see reality more clearly” (TGIN 383). The narrator of Tharoor is not an omnipresent one though he is always in the periphery of events. He claims to know what happened in places where he was absent since he has deputed his men in such places.

A very important feature of postmodern metafiction is its excessive use of parody which is done in a very genteel manner. It does not destroy the past, instead protects and preserves the past by questioning it. The parodic nature of the tone and attitude that is adopted by the novelist weaves a complex web of sense and sensibility on various levels that ultimately results in extremely
sophisticated parody. It uses and abuses the texts and conventions of tradition. P. Balaswamy records:

Tharoor employs his pre-text for the purpose of parody, irony, and moreover, for breaking the illusions about the past. The kind of intertextuality provided by the *Mahabharata* helps Tharoor to use and abuse the intertextual echoes, inscribing their powerful allusions and then subverting that power through irony. (231)

Parody is an all-pervading feature in the case of *The Great Indian Novel* right from its very title, theme, style, treatment and technique. Parody is also an effective demystifying weapon used by Tharoor in his brilliant assessment of contemporary history. The parodic and self-parodic intent embedded in the textual structure provides the novelist with the necessary distancing from his culture and tradition. The parodic mode also acquits the author of the most sacrilegious and blasphemous mutilation of the sacred epic text. It gives him excessive freedom in lampooning even the divine. Tharoor names the title of the eighteen books in his novel with the parodic inversions of several well known works with Indian settings. The description of the divine scribe Ganapathi too is done in the same parodic vein:

So, the next day the chap appeared, the amanuensis. Name of Ganapathi, South Indian, I suppose, with a big nose and
shrewd, intelligent eyes. Through which he is staring owlishly at me as I dictate these words. (TGIN 18)

The narrator-protagonist Ved Vy as subverts the celestial halo of the scribe and makes hilarious descriptions:

I knew that whenever he took a break to fill that substantial belly, or went around the corner for a leak, I could gain time by speaking into my little Japanese tape-recorder. So you see, Ganapathi, young man, it’s not just insults and personal remarks you’ll have to cope with. It’s modern technology as well. (TGIN 18)

The irreverence, the irony and the humour are all based on the parodic effect that is consciously created by a most unlikely fusion of tradition and modernity. The depiction of Mohammed Ali Jinnah as Mohammed Ali Karna is another effective use of parody. A profuse outpour of parody is apparent in the delineation of the physical appearance of Karna. His face shone as bright as sun and women used to swoon over his beauty:

The matronly housewife in the adjoining bungalow swore that the sun emerged each morning from his window, and that a grey afternoon he had only to appear on the verandah for the clouds to be dispelled. (TGIN 136)
Parody is generic, eurocentric and phallocentric too in the narrative. M. F. Salat’s observation is pertinent here:

The parodic intent, sustained throughout the novel through witty asides, puns, and cryptic parentheses, is relentlessly aimed at dis-covering India that is neither idealized nor wholly depreciated but depicted honestly and sans prejudice or bias. In a very profound sense, therefore, the parodic mode enshrines a moral stance and enables Tharoor to recover a truer perception of Indian cultural history. (131)

The self-mockery and self-irony by Tharoor justifies the liberties he has taken with the plots and characters of *The Mahabharata* and also of the modern *Bharata*. It also helps to generate a sense of humour in the readers which has pathetically lost its significance in a grief-stricken environment of India. Parody is present in choice and elaboration of form and theme and in almost all aspects of the novel. Tharoor parodies and decontextualizes history while emphasizing the quixotic and the irrational. Being a subversion of history, the predominant style and tone used in the novel is that of parody and polemic.

Irony is employed by the author while referring to the brutal massacre at Jallianwallah Bagh. The ironic tone used is detached, calm and composed similar to that of Rushdie when he refers to the same incident in *Midnight’s Children*. Tharoor records in his novel:
They loaded and fired their rifles coldly, clinically, without haste or passion or sweat or anger, resting their weapons against the tops of the brick walls so thoughtfully built in Shantanu’s enlightened reign and emptying their magazines into the human beings before them with trained precision.

(TGIN 80)

In the treatment of Gangaji also, Tharoor sprays some ironic humour here and there. He ironically describes Gangaji’s attempt at testing his own celibacy which arouses a comic curiosity in the readers. Mock-epic style is also employed in the scene showing Ganga Dutta-Gandhi in his deathbed:

And when he called for the final sip of water which is the dying Hindu’s last prerogative on earth, a lustrous youth stepped forward to shoot another arrow into the ground by the Mahaguru’s head. The arrow sprang from his bow as if released from an unbearable tension, flew through the air and imbedded itself quivering in the earth. (TGIN 233)

Rebellious irony becomes a mode of perception rather than a structural device in The Great Indian Novel. Tharoor’s talent for pyrotechnics is palpable in a number of passages with mock-epic overtones. There are occasions when Tharoor directs his ironic and parodic glance at the complacent attitude of the Indian public. He satirically comments on the self-satisfied attitude of the Indian
people strengthened by the vestiges of fatalism. They are oblivious of any sort of deliverance. He humorously points out the lapses inherent in the Indian subconscious. It is this sense of freedom in humour that enables Tharoor to say many unpalatable things and get away with that. Tharoor exhorts his reader when he writes: “Derive your standards from the world around you and not from a heritage whose relevance must be constantly tested” (TGIN 418).

The most crackling humorous expressions are to be found in the verse passages in this predominantly prose narrative. The most extensive form of verse narration is seen in section 50-55, in the ninth book, ‘Him or the Far Power Villain’. This self-conscious lapse of the narrator into poetry seeks justification by stating that the respective subject requires sophistry and a sprinkle of bathos.

To tell the tale of Pandu

Will not detain us long;

His slogan was a ‘can do!’

And on his lips a song.

Oh, pour some draughts of red wine

Into history’s bloody jars;

Learn there’s just a thin line

‘Twixt tragedy and farce. (TGIN 176)
The entire poem is vibrant with a mock-epic tone since Tharoor deliberately composes these lines in a clumsy, casual manner. He imitates the racy, catchy style of Vikram Seth, the author of *Golden Gate* (1986) in his versification. Tharoor handles the rhyme and meter with effortless ease and confidence. The rhyme scheme is abab. He exhibits a verbal virtuosity and mastery over rhyme and meter as well as in the choice and usage of alliterative and metaphoric words.

The novel is definitely a supreme testimony to Tharoor’s hegemonic control over the King’s language and diction. Critics have identified a Kafkian touch in the narrative extravaganza of Tharoor. He has given a new dimension to the linguistic acrobatics that Rushdie has developed. Tharoor’s rhetorical flourishes are punctuated with short crisp sentences without emphasizes or judgements. Language in the hands of Tharoor serves as an effective demystifying weapon. He deliberately devalues the religious sanctity of the original text by referring to the sublime achievements of the grand heroes in terms of current language and idioms. Tharoor’s Vyas declares unashamedly about his own birth: “I was born with the century, a bastard, but a bastard in a fine tradition, the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a travelling sage” (TGIN 19). By applying a mediocre language to an elevated theme, the author is trying to effect a subversion of faith. A farcical
tone is also generated due to the usage of variety of meters and ballad forms. Though it suggests epic potential, the style is comic. The narrative is replete with lots of hilarious wit and verve. M. L. Pandit opines about the language of Tharoor:

His witticisms of language and caricature of characters are fitted into the ready-made structure of an epic poem that in its original sweeps across worlds of romance, faith, belief and philosophy of life. Tharoor tends to be discursive and repetitive, if only in his attempt to parody the enormously wide range of the original. (63)

The auto-urine therapy of Morarji Desai is sardonically lampooned by the author when he writes: “. . . many would have preferred him to be more preoccupied with political, rather than urinary, tracts” (TGIN 362). There are myriad occasions in the narrative when the author seems to be obsessed with thick alliterative prose. For instance:

They didn’t starve to death, because they slaved and swept and sowed and stood and served and scratched in order to slake the hunger in their bellies, and found just enough to keep alive-underfed, undernourished, undergrown, underweight, underclad, undereducated, underactive, underemployed, undervalued, and underfoot, but alive. (TGIN 357)
The alliterative acumen of the writer reaches its zenith when he described the growing autocratic powers of India Gandhi. Tharoor says that Priya Duryodhani tried “. . . to prohibit, proscribe, profane, prolate prosecute or prostitute all the freedoms the national movement had fought to attain during all those years of my Kaurava life” (TGIN 357).

Though there is no Rushdiean *chutnification* of language, Tharoor too abrogates and appropriates the colonizer’s tongue by incorporating Sanskrit and Hindi words into his mock-epic narration. Unlike Rushdie, Tharoor indicates the presence of the vernacular by showing it in italics. The sprightly, pristine prose of Tharoor enables the Indians to laugh at the various vicissitudes of their own people and country. Regarding the language of the novel, N. Eakambaran and Geetha K. record:

There is a certain self-consciousness about the language. It is ‘literary’ and precious with frequent strings of alliteration. There is no doubt that Tharoor has a sensitive command over the English language. It is a sparkling prose, punctuated by riotous verse, and it invariably creates the effect of a mock-epic. This does not mean that the purpose it is meant to serve is liquidated or even diluted. (82)

Tharoor employs the strategy of explicit erotic puns in some areas. Unlike Vijayan, Tharoor’s use of eroticism does not form any
link with the main course of events in the novel. When king Vichitravirya dies childless, leaving behind his two widow queens; Satyawati, the Queen Mother sends for Vyas to sleep with them in order to father heirs to the throne. She is very confident that if her son is like his father he would be able to do the job. Vyas corroborates his mother’s surmise: “And indeed I could. We Brahmin sons never deny our mothers, and we never fail to rise to these occasions. I rose. I came” (TGIN 31). Such indirect erotic puns are also used with reference to the lives of Subhas Chandra Bose and that of Nehru. Tharoor employs black humour to present pornographic details about the sexual life of Raja of Kashmir, Vyabhichar Singh. Farcical depiction is also given regarding the escapades of Arjun with a prostitute. Eroticism for Tharoor is not a demystifying technique as in the hands of Vijayan but a means to project the rottenness that has crept into the moral values of our nation.

Tharoor denies a closed structure to his narrative, which definitely is a typical postmodern fictive strategy. It lays premium on process rather than on the product. The open-ended structure suggests the continuation of the historical process; the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past.

While winding up, Ved Vyas wishes to begin his narration again as he tells his amanuensis Ganapathi: “. . . stories never end, they
just continue somewhere else” (TGIN 418). Hence, he is going to re-tell the story of India because the essence of the tale lay in the re-telling. It must be told repeatedly so that each time they may come across new interpretations and better perceptions. The narrator begins the story with the sentence: “They tell me India is an underdeveloped country” (TGIN 17). The very same sentence is used to end the story as well. He must re-tell the story repeatedly because each re-telling opens out new avenues of meaning. The entire fictional edifice is deconstructed at the close of the novel when the narrator confides: “. . . I have told my story so far from a completely mistaken perspective. I have thought about it, Ganapathi, and I realize I have no choice. I must retell it” (TGIN 418). The implementation of open-ended structure is an innovative stylistic technique used in the modernist writing. It denotes a total deviation from the canons of the realistic modes of narration.

*The Great Indian Novel* is an audacious re-writing of history in an unprecedented scale in the sense that it exhibits singular courage to deconstruct the Indian epic to re-read its hallowed history and myth. Tharoor’s forte lies in the minute craftsmanship in this prefabricated plot. He cleverly interweaves the fate and fortunes of the players of the never-ending comic drama of modern Indian politics into the existing frame of the epic *Mahabharata*. The novel not only chastises the colonizers for their exploitation of India
but also castigates the colonized (subsequently liberated) Indians for their failure to make the best of opportunities that came their way. Unlike *Midnight’s Children*, the ironic narrator does not have any emotional involvement in the story and hence he does not emotionally involve the reader either. Tharoor achieves what his narrator sets out to achieve—to show that “. . . India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay” (TGIN 17).

Tharoor seeks to recover an adequate sense of pride in India’s rich culture by attempting to show in human terms what happened to us and what we have lost. He does not suggest any definitive alternatives but leaves the readers to make their own assessment of India’s socio-political and cultural situation. By slovenly assaulting the ancient myth, Tharoor experiments with a number of demystifying strategies. Disenchantment with the inherited world prompted Tharoor to devise unconventional techniques of demystification in his fictionalization of the contemporary life. Tharoor expresses his disillusionment with the country’s declining political culture through various innovative stylistic devices. With the help of the fresh strategies, he is trying to cast a shadow of doubt upon the very foundations of ancient values enshrined in the ancient epic. The author adopts a very unrealistic mode of writing by denying a definite meaning to his literary creation. The sensitive
mind of Tharoor abandoned all conventional ways of writing to express his deep felt anger and disgust over the morally tarnished Indian political situation. He trivializes the serious and veils it in fresh fictional techniques of demystification to create an altogether new reading experience.