CHAPTER IV

SHASHI THAROOR’S THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

*The Great Indian Novel is a Literacy de force undermining the age old Indian Complacency displayed in accepting everything Ancient and anything foreign. It is a strange vision of contemporary India retold in the grab of the ancient tale of story – telling*

- Ayyapppa Panikar

Introduction:

Shashi Tharoor's title, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), is perhaps derived from the concept of “The Great American Novel”. Philip Roth uses this concept and gives it as his title for his novel published in 1973. While Philip Roth take the American Pastime, baseball, as his background, such as Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* distinctly relates to the ancient epic ‘The Mahabharata’. In Sanskrit Maha, means ‘Great’ and ‘Bharata’ means ‘India’. Thus the Mahabharata is a Great Indian story.

Shashi Tharoor's ‘*The Great Indian Novel*’ is not only an ambitious novel but a complex work of art. It is an entertaining and occasionally moving book that will certainly repay the time of anyone interested in and moderately knowledgeable about two somewhat disparate subjects, *The Mahabharata* and the history of modern India,
which are so cleverly and pointedly intertwined in this remarkable book. Hence the *Mahabharata* is the Great story of the Indian race, *The Bharatas*, the ancestors of present day Indians. The last word of the title also deserves a brief comment. If indeed the text can be read as belonging to the polymorphous genre of fiction, it is novel also in so far as it offers new and one may add contemporary material, about the story of India as told through the ancient epic. The visible text is that of Indian history from the birth of the nationalist movement under the British Raj to the situation of the country after the assassination of Indira Gandhi, which is, roughly speaking, the last century of Indian History. So it is essentially a vision of New (Modern, Colonial and Post Colonial) India that comes to mind as the reader goes through the four hundred or so pages of the narrative of the novel which is constructed as an epic dictated by an aged politician and poet, Ved Vyasa, to a scribe Ganpathi.

_Citation_ Shashi Tharoor – Ved Vyasa in The Great Indian Novel Narrates to Ganpathi, his script – writer, in pretentious jocular, garrulous and perky manner the story of modern India. He not only transforms the ancient myth into pre – Independence and Post – Independence politics but also transforms the contemporary political history into a myth of some kind or other.²

Shashi Tharoor established his name in Post Modern English literature with the publication of "*The Great Indian Novel*" in 1989. The story narrated in the novel is more or less a political commentary on the history of India since the advent of Ghandhi. Characters in this political novel bear the names of characters from *Mahabharata*, Gandhi is Gangaji Dhritarashtra is Jawaharlal Nehru, and Priya is Indira Priyadarshini. The story begins with Gandhi or Gangaji and moves to

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the days of Jawaharlal Nehru as the prime Minister of India, and then to Lal Bahadur Shastri and Indira Priyadarshini. The novel ends with the days of National Emergency and the Emergence of Janata party, its grand alliance, success in the polls and its defeat later on. Bill Ashcroft says.

*If there was ever a time when writers could refuge from politics in the world of imagination then the time has long past.*

In this novel every significant individual in the Indian freedom struggle and Post Independence political arena from Gandhi and Jinah to Lord Mountbatten, Indira Gandhi, and Morarji Desai is cleverly represented by a more or less appropriate character from the ancient epic. While their historic actions and interactions are made to conform to the poem’s well known episodes-

*Shashi Tharoor’s “Fiction recasting” of the epic sets up a perspective which connects not only its narrative but also the underlying notions of history, fiction and narrativisation, with ancient and resilient Indian traditions. It is through such a return to indigenous traditions that the novel poses a significant post – colonial challenge to the dominant eastern paradigms of narrative in fiction and historiography. Its narrative strategy allows Shashi Tharoor to suggest, in indigenous cultural, traditions and myths, an alternative, to the western paradigm of narrative with a beginning, middle and end.*

*The Great Indian Novel* is a large sprawling novel with a loose, episodic structure. It is modeled on the ancient epic of Vyasa, the *Mahabharata*, in terms of both structure and issues. The novel is divided into eighteen books which are skillfully planned as parallels to the cantos of Vyasa’s epic. The books are given titles which parody well-known literary works on India by British and Indian authors and display the intersexuality of the novel. There are chapters entitled. *The duel with*
the crown: A Raj Quartet and “The powers of silence” which recall the Raj fiction of Paul Scott. The chapter named “Passage through India” is a fitting reply to E.M. Forester’s famous novel "A Passage to India". While ‘The Bungle Book’ which narrates the tyrannical rule of Indira Gandhi, reminds one of Rudyard Kipling’s The Jungle Book, ‘The Far Power villain’ is reminiscent of M.M. Kaye’s The Far Pavilions. The author’s debt to Salman Rushdie is tacitly acknowledged in entitling a chapter ‘Midnights Parents’.

The novel synchronizes the epic narrative of the Mahabharata and the twentieth century political history of India. It covers the period of Indian history from the advent of Mahatma Gandhi as the undisputed leader of the freedom struggle against the British Raj to the Emergency rule of Indira Gandhi, high-lighting reroute some landmark events like the Champparan Satyagraha, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, The Salt March, the Quit India movement, The Partition of India and its Independence, the country’s war, with Pakistan and China, the birth of Bangladesh and the dismemberment of the Land of the pure, the horror of the Emergency and its aftermath. The shape and sequential drift of the novel is dictated by the epic narrative of the Mahabharata which provides Tharoor fictional reconstruction of national history. The Great Indian Novel centers on themes and concerns which one finds at the core of the epic narrative: power, politics, schisms, conspiracy, and personality clashes leading to fratricidal war, institutional structures, and individuals as well as collective dharma.

Through a creative use of the mythic setting, Tharoor builds up an order where present are inextricably entwined. Instead of using two separate time – frames - one for the epic age and the other for the
modern – he fuses them into one, presenting events, episodes and characters from the ‘Mahabharata’ as contemporaneous with the present. One thus finds a simultaneous description of the ancient and modern reality, each mirroring the other and modifying the reader’s perceptions of both. Tharoor uses the allegorical mode in which the story of the Mahabharata becomes a structuring device to create an individual and highly subjective/subversive version of India’s Post and offers an incisive commentary on the political events and personalities of twentieth century India. Since the novel is based on the Mahabharata, it would not be out of place to give a brief outline of the epic.

The Mahabharata contains about 40,000 verses of eight and eleven syllables each, although these verses are divided into stanzas (called shloka and tristubh) of four verses each......

*The books are of very unequal length, varying from a few hundred to several thousand stanzas and there is also a supplementary book – the Harrivansha of 16,000 stanzas.*

If the legends be reconstructed historically, with the aid of the puranik lists of kings, they show that a real historical background is reflected in the maze of myths.

**The Mahabharata**

The Mahabharata begins with an introduction, giving a brief biographical detail about Ved Vyasa, whose mother Satyawati was seduced by Rishi Parashar and the results was his birth. Satyawati’s marriage with Shantanu, the birth of Chitraganada and vichitravirya, Bhisma’s vow for eternal celibacy etc. are disclosed in it. The origin of
gods and men in general, forms a part of the narrative. The same book also deals with the birth of Dhritarashtra and Pandu, their education by their uncle Bhisma and their marriage. Dhritarashtra marries Gandhari who gives birth to hundred sons called kurus. Pandu marries Madri and Kunti. The curse on Pandu, his death, Madri committing sati on his pyre; Kunti’s survival to bring up his five children (who are really sons of Gods by a divine boon) all this is narrated in the same.

After this introduction, begins the second book entitled Sabha (The Assembly) describing the assembly in the gaming ball where the epic drama unfolds. At Hastinapur, the Kurus hold an assembly to which they have invited the Pandaras who after various adventures had built a town at Indraprasta. The kurus hatch a conspiracy to usurp the kingdom of Pandavas by a game of dice. Yudhishthir plays and loses all his wealth including the kingdom, himself, his brothers as well as his wife. Thereafter, they are expelled from the kingdom for twelve years in the forest and according to the terms, the thirteenth year should be spent in disguise but if recognized and found, they would have to undergo the exile for the next twelve years.

The third book called Vana (forest) describes Pandava’s life in the jungle and has some legends knitted into it. The fourth book takes its name Virata from the name of the king with whom the Pandavas take refuge at the end of the twelfth year and narrates how they spend their last year in disguise.

The fifth book is called Udyoga (preparation for war), while the following four books are named after the leaders in the battle, Bhishma, Drona, Karna and Salya. It is in the chapter called Bhishma that the long
poem the Bhagvad Gita is inserted.

The tenth book is called Saupika (The night Attack), which describes how the Kurus made an attack by night on the camp of their opponents, killing all but the five Pandavas. It is followed by a short book called Strī. (Women). This gives an account of the lamentation of women over the dead. In the following long and didactic books, called Shanti and Anushasan, Bhīṣma, Preaches religion and philosophy and prescribes rules of ethical behaviour. Yudhīṣthīr is crowned emperor and in the fourteenth book called Ashwamedhika (horse – Sacrifice), he performs the horse – sacrifice as the proclamation of undisputed leadership.

The fifteenth book called ‘Ashram – Avasika (Hermitage) narrates how Dhṛitarāṣṭra and his queen with Kuntī retire into the woods, where they die in fire. The sixteenth book called Mausala (the club – Battle) describes the death of Kṛṣṇa and Balarade and how the city of Dwarka got submerged in the sea.

The seventeenth book Mahāprasthānīka (The Great Renunciation), tells how the Pandavas renounce their kingdom and ascend to heaven. This is supplemented by the last book of the epic proper called Svāgarōhana (Ascent to Heaven) describing the journey. To this is later added the Harivamsa (Genealogy of Vīṣṇu), a long account in three sections of the life and family of Kṛṣṇa as an incarnation of Vīṣṇu.

In conformity with the narrative design of the Mahābhārata, Tharoor begins his account with the birth of Veda Vyāsa, the author of the Mahābhārata and the narrator of Tharoor’s ‘The Great Indian
Novel, is the archetypical author who, with a tongue – in cheek manner, gives his own comment about the situations and characters of the discourse. The first section of the Mahabharata starts with lord Ganesha writing the text of the epic while Vyasa dictates it to him. For the Mahabharata starts with Lord Ganesh writing the text of the epic while Vyasa dictates it to him. For The Mahabharata, it so happens that Ganesha agrees to write the epic under the pre-condition that Sage Vyasa would never pause while dictating him the epic. Vyasa agrees to the condition with a rider that Ganesha should also take time to understand the things that have been dictated before writing it down.

As in The Mahabharata’ in the text of The Great Indian Novel’ too Ganapathi puts his condition before Vyasa,” I shall reside with you, and as long I m ready you must not pause in your dictation”8 and Vyas agrees. However, Vyasa remembers his own condition. “I made my own condition; that he had to understand every word of what I said before he took it down”9 Thus, the retired politician V.V, in the text ‘The Great Indian Novel, decides to write the story of the ‘Great India’, or the story of The ‘Mahabharata’. Tharoor parodies the narrative style as well as the characterization of the ‘Mahabharata’ in his own novel. His text is in first person narration, starting with the story of the birth and early life experiences of Ved Vyasa himself, popularly known as V.V. in the text. When V.v. decides to write down the state of affairs of the Great land of India, he searches for a writer for himself who would write the mock-heroic text for him. Then he gets the recommendation for Ganapathi, a south Indian fellow, who would write the assignment for him. After his encounter with the witty Ganapathi, Vyasa starts the assignment of his Great epic about the Indian subcontinent. The name of the text by

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Tharoor not only resembles the name of the sacred text of *The Mahabharata* but it also resembles the mythical characters by name and appearance. Thus Tharoor playfully describes Ganapathi as “Name of Ganapathi, south Indian, I suppose, with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes”. By choosing a south Indian fellow as Ganapathi, Tharoor contemporizes as well as stereotypes the held notion of South Indians being studious and intelligent. Even the “Shrewd intelligent eyes”. Symbolizes the keenness for particular information and minute details.

Tharoor ridicules the rituals of the Vedic culture while mocking the contemporary society. While describing about himself, Vyasa in *The Great Indian Novel* mentions that: {“I was born with the Century, a bastard, but a bastard in a fine tradition the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a traveling sage”}

While narrating the story of Satyavati, the mother of Sage Ved Vyasa, Tharoor describes the prevalent custom where Brahmins and Sages would ask young girls to accompany them with a promise of higher learning in return. Tharoor mocks this custom by saying that such company of sages resulted in the birth of numerous illegitimate children such as Ved Vyasa, the author of the *Mahabharata* itself. According to the Mythical story of The *Mahabharata*, sage Parashar is smitten by the incredible beauty of the fisherwoman and wants her to accompany him. He requests her father to let Satyavati accompany him in the pursuit of higher knowledge. Tharoor mocks at this custom when he describes the result of the companionship of Satyavati and sage Parashar. After Ved Vyasa is born and taken away from his mother, Satyavati returns to her
fathers place. The unmarried women accompanying the Brahmins thus resulted in numerous unmarried mothers and Tharoor ridicules the custom by saying through the voice of Ved Vyasa.…

My father had taught her several lessons from the ancient texts, including one or two related to the inscrutabilities of virginity. Upon her return, to quell the rumors in the village, her father had Satyavati examined by senior midwife. Her hymen was pronounced intact…. Brahmins knew a Great deal in those days.13

By relating a story from the past about inbreeding between high and low castes, Tharoor firmly establishes the presence of the postmodern in both epic ‘The Mahabharata’ as well as his contemporary novel. Also by focusing on a merger between people from different strata of the ancient Indian society, Tharoor conveniently pokes fun at contemporary socio-political scenario of India where caste and class still hold their ground and caste based and class based politics still rules the roost. The society that seems prone to adulterous norms has been the target of attack by Tharoor as he ridicules the vow of life long celibacy of Ganga. In ‘The Mahabharata, king Shantanu falls in love with Satyavati, the fisherwoman and wants to marry her. But her father is against their marriage because he is afraid of Prince Ganga who might end up being the king of Hastinapur. The old fisher king challenges king Shantanu to hold down Ganga from becoming the king and wants his own future grandson crowned the king. Prince Ganga, who loves and respects his father immeasurably, takes the vow of celibacy. He vows never to be married or indulge in an act of lust or love with a woman and it is only for the sake of his fathers’ joy. Thus, Tharoor uses magical realism as well as parody as a narrative weapon that looks at the sacrifice of Ganga as a mockery of filial love and

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respect. He ridicules the state of affairs of the royal family writing:

Ganga was greeted with relief and admiration by his father and king. ‘That was a fine thing to do, my son,’ Shantanu said, unable to conceal his pleasure. ‘A far, far better thing than I could ever have done. I don’t know about this celibacy stuff, but I’m sure it’ll do you a lot of good in the long run. I’ll tell you something my son: I’ve simply no doubt at all that it’ll give you longevity. You will not die unless and until you really want to die.’

The relationship between Shantanu and Ganga, here is a mockery of the pure relationship between father and son. Tharoor notices that Shantanu, for his own pleasures of flesh, puts his son Ganga into the ordeal. Ganga also known as Bhishma is a legendary character in The Mahabharata. The actual name of Ganga is Dehabrate. But due to the terrible vow he has taken he is later known as Bhishma which literally means ‘something terrible.’ Further, Ganga kidnaps the three princesses Amba, Ambika, and Ambalika “of a distant princelling” for his brother Vichitravirya. On the night before Vichitravirya would marry all the three princesses, Ganga encounters princess Amba in his room, he is surprised and startled because he being a celibate, did not expect a woman in his bedroom. Tharoor, however, twists the tale as he sees Ganga’s reaction from a different perspective and considers it as the celibate prince’s lack of self-restraint. He ridicules this situation when he writes: “I haven’t come for… that’, Amba said in some confusion. But about other things”. This hilarious depiction of the event is a satirical parody on the vow of celibacy of Ganga, who in the text ‘The Great Indian Novel’, is persistently in the fear of losing his celibacy. Whenever any woman encounters him, he becomes judgmental about his own mental strength. Thus, Tharoor ridicules the vow of celibacy by
Ganga while satirizing on the mythical and magical events of “The Mahabharata”

In ‘The Great Indian Novel’, Tharoor mocks recreating the situation of the sacred text ‘The Mahabharata’. According to the epic story, Vichitravirya, the son of king Shantanu and Satyavati, dies young leaving behind his two young wives, Ambika and Ambalika childless. After the death of Vichitravirya, his mother Satyavati tries to convince her other son Ganga to “take Ambika and Ambalika to bed”17 as this is also a customary norm during that period. But the Prince Ganga, who is now Bhisma, is too obsessed with his vow of celibacy and politely turns down the request of his mother. Being a highly ambitious mother, Satyavati turns her gaze towards her other son whom she had given birth before marriage, Ved Vyasa. As she would tell Ganga ask Bhishma:

*Don’t forget that we have a long tradition of Brahmins coming to the rescue of barren kshatriya. It may have fallen somewhat into disuse in recent years, but it could be useful again today.* 18

Finally, she succeeds in convincing Ganga to invite Ved Vyasa to the palace of Hastinapur to give an heir to the kingdom by bedding the new widows Ambika and Ambalika. Tharoor, here expertly takes satire as a tool to serve his point of turning the heroic epic into a mock heroic epic with a tint of wit and humor. It is also interesting that Veda Vyasa, Satyavati son from her pre-marital liaison with sage Parashar, would now come to the rescue of her barren kingdom.

In ‘The Mahabharata’, Prince Pandu, the nephew of Ganga and son of Ambalika, is the king off Hastinapur. He is happily married to two beautiful princesses, Kunti and Madri. But unfortunately, he kills sage Hindama while mistaking him to be a deer in a jungle. The Sage

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who was making love to his wife when being killed by king Pandu, 
curses the king that Pandu would die the time he would make love to a 
woman. Tharoor takes the mythical incident in a realistic way and 
humorously retells the story while recreating the myth. In the text The 
Great Indian Novel’, Pandu suffers from a fatal cardiac disease. Tharoor 
describes the position of Pandu when he writes the event. In the text the 
doctor bluntly informs king Pandu that “your heart is simply no longer 
able to withstand the strain of sexual intercourse. It you want to live 
your highness, you must abstain from any kind of erotic activity”.¹⁹ The 
association of the Sage, his curse and the inviolability of the state of 
affairs that is depicted in 'The Mahabharata' has been replaced by the 
realistic approach of Tharoor in his text. Tharoor is almost funny when 
he describes the conversation between the apathetic doctor and the 
sexually over active Pandu thus:

"....and I mean completely, give up the pleasures of the flesh: 
'you mean I have to stop eating meat?' Pandu asked.

The doctor sighed at the failure of his euphemism. "I mean you 
have to stop having sex' he translated bluntly. 'your heart is 
simply no longer able to withstand the strain of sexual 
terourse."²⁰

'The Mahabharata' has many archetypal characters, which 
Tharoor explores with a new satirical perspective. The character of 
Eklavya in the Mahabharata is very famous for his devotion towards 
learning and respect for his teacher. However, Tharoor has satirized this 
legendary character in his text. In the original sacred text, Eklavya 
excels in his field and emerges as a threat to Arjun, Drona's Favorite 
student and a Prince Guru Drona asks for the right thumb of Eklavya as 
his lesson. Nevertheless, in Tharoor's 'The Great Indian Novel, Eklavya,
very funnily, refuses to cut his thumb and give it to his teacher. Tharoor
narrates the situation in which Guru Drona forces Eklavya to cut his
thumb but Eklavya, the son of a maid servant refutes such dumb foolery.
Far away from being the iconic ideal student, Eklavya symbolizes the
contemporary youth whose relationship with their teachers are more of
kinds of business deal. Tharoor explores the legendary character more
when he writes:

Eklavya stands his ground, but swallows, his dark face burning
darker in his dismay. 'I cannot destroy my life and my mother's
to pay your fee', he says faintly and firmly. The boy steps back
look wildly around him, and trips hastily out of the room. 21

Shashi Tharoor, by archetypal character of Eklavya recreates a
modern dimension or perspective. Moreover it paves the way to the
contemporary analysis of Imaginary historical character of Eklavya.
Tharoor Postcolonial perspective, in recreating history explores Eklavya
character who as representative of modern man denies the tradition
because of crucial reality. In 'The Great Indian Novel' Tharoor are
imitating Great epics and sacred religious texts with a satire of the
conformist, the normative, and the ancient as well as contemporary
society.

Myth, History and Contemporary Society

'The Great Indian Novel' seeks to present the myth of
Mahabharata in its mediations and subversions. The novel is very
captivating insofar as it deals with the contemporary Indian history in
terms of ancient Indian myth with the deployment of the device of
'ironic reversals' devised for the exclusive purpose. The text, The
Great Indian Novel, is exegetic in as much as it chooses to make a
commentary on the post-independence political situation beginning with
the major developments in the pre-independence days. The novel lends
actuality and contextually to the traditional text with linguistic
manipulation on post-modern lines. Myth is pressed into service as an
interpretive strategy as well as a narrative strategy. Shashi Tharoor uses
the mythic setting of the ancient epic to foreground the external present,
the continuance of the historical process from India's remote past to the
present. It operates in the manner of Rushdie's fantasy which
-corresponds to the reality only obliquely; howsoever deliberate the
desire of questioning the present may be. But it is not a case of
mythography as history, which J.S. Negi understands thus:

"Myths might have originated in chronological sequence but the
manner in which they have been recorded all over the world
hardly admits of temporal classification. Similarly their
diffusive character makes them overflow the confines of space.
Mythography is therefore not the same as historiography of
myths. They can only be studied in terms of their themes and
forms, i.e. 15"

Shashi Tharoor has blended the elements of Myth, history and
contemporary society in 'The Great Indian Novel' to quote the novelist's
views:

"The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political
history of the twentieth - century India through a fictional
recasting of events, episodes and characters from the
Mahabharata. The epic has been widely read and has left a
lasting impression on Indian Mind. 25"

The Mahabharata is not only a great epic having been highly
regarded for its artistic excellence but has become a mode of governing
one's life as, C.R. Deshpande remarks in similar vein:
The Mahabharata has not only influenced the literature, art, sculpture and painting of India but it has also molded the very character of the Indian people.\textsuperscript{24}

Shashi Tharoor is conscious of the fact that finding connections between myth and reality is a characteristic of the Indian mind:

The Mahabharata has come to stand for so much in the popular consciousness of Indians: the personages in it have become household words, standing for public virtues and vices and the issues it raises, as well as the values it seeks to promote, are central to an understanding of what makes India.\textsuperscript{n25}

The Mahabharata provides the most appropriate allegorical background to understand the modern Indian situation. Tharoor makes use of the mythical setting of the ancient epic to foreground the eternal present and prove the continuity of the historical process from India's remote past to the present. The author Shashi Tharoor himself states modestly, how he modeled the text on the lines of Mahabharata epic which is a household word in the Indian sub-continent:

The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political history of 20th Century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from Mahabharata as I explained in an author's note at the very beginning of the book its title is not a reflection of my estimate of its contents, but a reference to this source of inspiration (for 'Mahabharatha' after all, can be read to mean "Great India")\textsuperscript{n26}

These words of Shashi Tharoor are self-explanatory. The Great Indian Novel is 'Mahabharata re-written in which Shashi Tharoor uses myth elaborately to function as the prototype. The ancient epic of Vyasa provides for Tharoor's novel not only the narrative aesthetics but also a pattern of life as well as a value system to refer to. Tharoor discovers a meaningful correspondence between the new myth of India's freedom struggle and fight for democracy and the epic battle to uphold truth and

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dharma which took place in the country's fabulous antiquity. The account of recent Indian history in his novel revives the memory of the mythic age and evokes the feeling that contemporary Indian reality can be comprehended in the critical light of the country's mythical past. It suggests that ancient Hastinapur also contained, like present day India, 'midnight's parents' like Dhritarashtra, Karna, Vidur and Pandu; Villainous advisers like Shakuni; self-seeking and arrogant politicians like Priya Duryodhani whose inordinate greed for power brought about untold misery and suffering to the people. The novel makes a creative use of the mythic material to interpret contemporary history and critically evaluate the role of political personalities of twentieth century India. Tharoor uses the mythic setting as a parallel to the modern age. The remote past and the recent present reflect each other, as in a mirror, and this inter-reflection modifies the reader's usual perception of both the epic and the recent history.

Shashi Tharoor's novel begins with the birth of the narrator, Ved Vyas the narrator and traditional author of the Mahabharata and V.V.Ji, his contemporary counterpart, who gives a historical, mythical and modern touch to the original epic.

.... in my epic I shall tell of past, present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay, of death and rebirth; of what is, of what was, of what should have been27

Thus begins the re-narration of the five thousand year old epic from a new dimension and a new perspective. In the beginning of the novel, Ved Vyas begins with 'The Twice-Born Tale' and ends with the ascent of Yudhishtir to heaven 'The Path to Salvation'. After introducing the narrator, the story moves on to describe the love of Shantanu, king

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of Hastinapur, for Satyavati ‘the fisherman's daughter’, the appearance of Bhishma, his renunciation of the throne and terrible vow of celibacy to facilitate his father's marriage, and the emergence of Dhritrashtra, Pandu and Vidur. The engineered birth of Pandu's sons humorously described as 'heir-conditioning.\textsuperscript{28} is narrated according to the original account in the epic but Tharoor flavors it with humor and parody. Pandu's 'faithfully in-fidelious\textsuperscript{29} wives - Kunti and Madri are presented as ultra-modern women who speak English and smoke Turkish cigarettes and have been interpolated with the contemporary history of British colonialism and post-colonial India. He asserts emphatically......

\textit{This is my story, the story of Ved Vyasa eighty-eight years old and full of irrelevancies but it could become nothing less than The Great Indian Novel.}\textsuperscript{30}

Tharoor makes many such deviations from the original to fit the historical narrative into the narrative frame of the epic. The novel also accommodates a number of incidents from Vyasa's poem - some of them in a slightly modified form - which are not essential for the historical account. For example, the escape of the Pandava brothers from the Jotugriha (Lac house), their adventures during the period of exile, Arjun's banishment for a year, his love for and elopement with Subhadra, and his humiliation at the hands of a prostitute named Kameshwari. These diverting episodes are introduced to give the novel the amplitude and digressive quality of epic.

Many characters, incidents and issues in the novel, as the author acknowledges in the 'Afterword' "are based on the people and events described in the great epic the \textit{Mahabharata}, a work which remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India.\textsuperscript{31}
The political history of modern India as Tharoor demonstrates, resembles closely the events and characters of the great Indian epic,

*The nightmarish experience of the country during the darkest period in the history of free India helped revive the memory of the battle of Kurukshetra, giving birth to the realization that contemporary Indian reality can be understood only in relation to the myths and legends of India's remote past.*

Tharoor's novel begins with Ved Vyasa's autobiographical remarks, followed by the stories of Rishi Parashar, Shantanu, Satyavati, the circumstances of the birth of Pandu, Vidur, their childhood, and marriage. These episodes are left unchanged. Thus, the beginning of the novel remains more or less the same, with a few changes here and there. However the allegorical framework with the emergence of Mahatma Gandhi as the undisputed leader of Indian struggle for freedom from British rule and ends with the return of Indira Gandhi to power after the premature down-fall of the Janata front government. It covers a period of nearly seventy-five years and all the major political events that took place in pre-independence India and after independence: the Champaran Satyagraha, the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, the Salt March, the Round Table conference, Muslim League's demand for Pakistan, the Quit India Movement, the Partition and Independence of India, her conflicts with Pakistan and China, the Bangladesh War and the Emergency. Gandhiji is represented through Bhishma who is called Ganga Datta like his mythical archetype, he renounced his claim to power and reared his two young disciples, Dhritarashtra and Pandu (Nehru and Subhas) as his successors.

The characters of Gangaji (Gandhiji); Dhruttrashtra (Nehru), Pandu (Subhash Chandra Bose), Vidur (Sardar Patel), Karna (Jinnah)

*Chapter IV: Shashi Tharoor’s “The Great Indian Novel”*
are introduced and thereby the ground for political confrontation, the
graph of fiction alters from the epic the author becomes selective in
choosing the events. What follows is a chain of events such as the
emergence of party politics, struggle for freedom. Sowing of communal
seeds, harvest of hatred in the form of partition, World War II and fall of
the British power, Pakistan's invasion on Kashmir, Indo-China War,
Pakistan-Bangladesh confrontation, the problem of refugees, the lust for
power and authority, rise of new heroes, the fall of Hyperion's, public
unrest, press and army alertness, nationalization of banks and the
Emergency.

The novel evinces Gandhi's undisguised preference for Nehru
which helped the latter to gain importance in the Congress Party and
become the Prime Minister of the country after Independence. It records
his role in the resignation of Subhash Chandra Bose from the Congress
Presidency and his expulsion from the party. Mohammed Ali Jinnah -
represented as Karna - was another serious contender for power. He had
all the qualities as well as the Charisma to lead the Congress Party. But
the circumstances of his birth and his monumental ego which would not
allow him to accept any subordinate role under Gandhi and Nehru led
him to leave the party and espouse the cause of the Muslim League. In
post-independence India Nehru was succeeded first by Lal Bahadur
Shastri, who was 'a good Prime Minister in his decent and well-meaning
way'.[3] and then by Indira Gandhi. Indira was chosen as Prime Minister
because the old guards of the Congress Party thought that she would
remain under their control. But belying all expectations, she soon turned
into Frankenstein's monster who threatened the democratic institutions
of the country. She tried her best to keep the Pandavas away from power
and even to eliminate them.

These events have been recast using parallel mythical names and indentical phrases. For instance, instead of naming Pakistan, Tharoor coins a new word 'Karnistan'. Without mentioning China, he refers to the Indo-Chinese tension as 'Chakra invasion. Similarly, Bangladesh war becomes 'Gelaby Desh War', L.O.C. becomes 'The Big-Mac Line', Democracy is made Draupadi Mokrasi and her disrobing is the Emergency. Which is referred to as 'sieve'. The dice game becomes ballot game - elections are used as dice, that

*had been made with paper, the material of ballots.*

Shashi Tharoor's sheer alchemy of genius makes the characters and incidents incorporated in the novel reminiscent of the milestones of historical events such as Jallianwala Baugh Massacre, the Dandi March, the Motihari Satyagrah, Chouri-Chora incident, Partition of the subcontinent, the assassination of Gandhiji, the wars with the neighboring countries, the Bangladesh War, the Emergency, the formation and fall of the Janta Government and Mrs. Gandhi's return to power among others.

In the re-enactment of the *Mahabharata* myth, the author draws parallels between the mythical narrative and its modern counterpart, but there are deviations too. Some characters are presented in a modern light. Thus the narrator V.V. Ji rests on his Japanese taperecorder to record and narrate stories of the past, present and future. Kunti in the novel is shown to be a highly fashionable woman following modern trends. The myth of Gandhari's hundred sons is contextually changed to a single daughter and she is named Duryodhani. Thus, not only the
number but also the gender of Dhritashtra's progeny is altered. Similarly, some of the episodes of the original epic have been replaced by their modern versions. The story of Draupadi Swayamver receives a novel treatment. Instead of shooting the eye of a revolving fish, the condition of the contest is:

.... Draupadi's suitor each of whom had to try to open the box. The first to let Draupadi out of it would be garlanded by Miss Mokrasi as her husband...  

Alterations of names and events are imperative to appropriate the myth. By incorporating changes in the epic, Tharoor questions the tradition of the passive acceptance of history as it is rendered to us. He is sceptical about the authenticity of history:

How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of the living past before truth is jeopardised by inaccuracy?  

Tharoor further comments on history.

We tend... to look back on history as if it were a stage play, with scene building upon scene, our hero moving from one action to the next in his remorseless stride to the climax. Yet life is never like that.... So the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood.

Thus, the very concept of history is implied to be a myth, which is an artificially imposed order. History is always in a state of evolution and is dynamic.

History is in a constant state of evolution .... going through the process of birth and rebirth.
According to Tharoor history is 'created' and 'recreated'. History is open to interpretations. The West dictated the history that had been used as a oriental discourse. It was written with the motive to rule the territory and become a tool to justify the foreign interference over the natives. Histories were often written to impose an artificial order of cause and effect on the events and thereby justify the deeds or misdeeds of the ruler. Over the period of time it was realized that history is a complex phenomenon. It is always governed by multiple factors and is not so simple as can be understood or explained by simple cause and effect each time. The record of the past needed to be scrutinized and that history had to be accessed with new parameters. Linda Hutcheon remarks:

Traditional narrative models both historigraphical and fictional - that are based on European models of continuous chronology and cause and effect relations are utterly inadequate to the task of narrating the history of the new world.  

Tharoor has problematical and questioned the verity, authority and hegemony of the European historical record.

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me .... announce in tones of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop. I tell them that if they would only read the Mahabharat and the Ramayan, study the Golden Ages of the Mauryas and the Guptas and even of those Muslim Chaps the Mughals, they would realize that India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.

Shashi Tharoor uses new method with myth and history is an attempt to 'un-invent' received histories and investigate the ontological issue of what constitutes fact and fiction and the relations between the
fact of history and the act of recording inherited history. Thus, univenting the imperial version of India as a 'poor' and 'underdeveloped country, Tharoor remarks:

\[
\text{It is difficult for you, living now with the evidence of that poverty around you, taking it for granted as a fact of life, to conceive of an India that was not poor, not unjust, not wretched. But that was how ndia was before the British came, or why would they have first sailed to a land of poverty and misery? No..... they came to and India that was fabulously rich and prosperous, they took what they could take, leaving.}^{41}
\]

He presents facts without any ambiguity. V.V. Ji tells Ganapti, his scribe:

\[
\text{Write this down: the British killed the Indian artisans, they created the Indian 'landless labourer, they exported our full-employment and they invented our poverty.}^{42}
\]

The Great Indian Novel\' is an attempt at revising, reappropriating and reinterpreting history - as a concept. It is an endeavour 'to articulate new codes of recognition'\(^{43}\)

With those acts of resistance, those re-orderings of consciousness that 'history has rendered silent or invisible can be recognized the shaping forces in a culture's tradition. Issues relating to the narrative form of intersexuality, the strategies of representation and the role of language are predominant in rewriting post-colonial and post-modern fiction.

Thematically, Tharoor's novel deals with divisions and conflicts that constitute the history of India from its remote, past to the present. In order to project the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past, the novelist has skillfully used a number of experimental
techniques including poetry and prose, realism and fantasy, hagiography and history and sociological and political views on events.

The greater part of the narrative, the Pandavas stay away from the corridors of power. They spend their time with their teacher and mentor Jayaprakash Drona (Narayan) in the countryside raising the people's political consciousness, clamouring for land reform and fighting against exploitation and corruption. The marriage of Arjun with D(raupadi) Mokrasi-who has mixed parentage, being the product of Nehru's illicit liaison with Edwina Mountbatten allegorically represents the union of Indian democracy with the voice of the people's uprising against Indira's misrule, which was led by Jayaprakash Narayan. After her electoral defeat, Yudhirshitr (Morarji) became the country's Prime Minister.

Tharoor's alternative version of history critically reassesses the role of leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawaharlal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Mohammed Ali Jinnah, Indira Gandhi, Jayaprakash Narayan and Morarji Desai. Unlike Rushdie, who preferred Nehru, Tharoor gives greater importance to the role of Gandhiji. The novel presents a compact but rounded portrait of the father of the nation whom contemporary Indians have failed to relate to their lives and hence consigned to the 'mists and myths of historical legend'.\(^{44}\) It recognizes his immense contribution to awaken the people to the evils of British rule.

Dream, fantasies and social reality are one of the powerful devices employed to interpolate episodes that are not in consonance with the mythical framework. Sometimes they also serve as the author’s appendage to comment on the events of history. For example, V.V. Ji
has a dream in the last sections of the book in which Yudhisthir express his surprise at the sight of Duryodhani enjoying the pleasures of heaven.

Since 'The Great Indian Novel' is a subversive history, the predominant style and tone used in the novel is that of parody and polemic. The novel aims to achieve an animated correspondence between myth and reality and uses a hybrid mode combining history, myth, autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, song and verse in a comic - burlesque manner. For instance, the Mango March is described in a light vein; and the reason behind choosing 15th August to grant Independence to India is hilarious.

"What made you choose such a date? It's my wedding anniversary," Drewpad responded innocently.

The novelist has made use of irony, puns, witticism and innuendoes to highlight the 'continuity' of the past in the present and the gulf that separates the two. Tharoor's attempt has been to create a passage between the modern and the ancient India through an ingenious use of the mythical setting.

The narrative depicts the unique manner in which Gandhiji mobilized the Indian masses to fight against colonialism by perfecting the weapons of non-violence civil disobedience and truth force. It records how he used fasting not only as a means of bringing his principles to life but also as a potent weapon to resist injustice.

_In fasting, in directing the strength of his convictions against himself, Gangaji taught us to resist injustice with arms that no one could take away from us. Gangaji's use of the fast made our very weakness a weapon. It captured the imagination of India in a way that no speech no prayer, no bomb had ever done._
Gandhiji widened the mass base of the Congress Party by bringing ordinary men and women into the main-stream of the freedom struggle and thus gave a new orientation to Indian nationalism side by side, Tharoor also takes cognizance of his innumerable fads (like taking enema, toilet - cleaning, celibacy, and love for the cows) and his use of Hindu cultural / religious rhetoric which not only galvanized the masses against the British but also alienated nationalist leaders of other communities from the congress party. The narrative holds Gandhi unequivocally responsible for Jinnah's disaffection with the Congress:

"Karna was not much of 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.... A Kaurava Party of prayer - meetings and unselective eclectici was not a party he would have cared to lead, let alone to remain a member of."

It is interesting to note that Tharoor deviates from the widely known account of Gandhiji's death and presents the sense of his murder as a dream sequence in which Shikhandin (Nathuram Godse) his assassin exposes his personal and political weaknesses and declares him to be a failure. The dying words of the father of the nation in Tharoor's narrative are thus not 'hey Ram' but 'I.... have .... failed' which seem to be an admission of Shikhandin's accusation.

Tharoor's novel makes a bold and creative use of the mythic setting for an interpretation and understanding of the historical process and uses this mode for a scathing commentary on the political episodes and personalities of Modern India.
However the novel commends his courageous efforts in the cause of freedom but it shows how he perished because of his lack of judgment and his impractical dreams. The modern prototype of mythical Pandu is viewed as a leader who could have changed the course of Indian history he had not been betrayed at home and abroad by his own party and by foreign powers. Mohammed Ali Jinnah, the exponent of the Two Nation theory, is exalted and romanticized by Tharoor in the guise of Karna 'whose golden skin glowed like a Sun and on whose forehead shone the bright little half moon that became his Party's Symbol' The mystery surrounding his birth made him an archetypal outsider like Kunti's Pre-marital offspring. The novel narrates in detail the reasons of his alienation from the congress party which made him join the Muslim League and demand a separate Muslim homeland.

In ’The Great Indian Novel', the portrait of Nehru presented not at all a flattering one. It seems to balance the (indiscriminately laudatory) account of Nehru's role in the Country’s politics given by official hagiographers of the Congress Party and government. The basic idea of his role is derived from that of blind Dhritarashtra: "He had the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was, but as he wanted it to be". This metaphorical blindness, together with his monumental ego and vaulting ambition, made him an appropriate prototype of Dhritarashtra. The narrative clearly suggests that he gained importance in the party hierarchy and defeated Subhash in the race for power because of Gandhiji's blessings. It does not conceal his unholy liaison with Edwina Mountbatten who was used by her wily husbands as a 'secret weapon' to charm Indian leaders. The novel accuses him of ignoring the appeal of Gandhiji and agreeing to the hasty and headless deal of partition at the
behest of Mountbatten and his wife. It chronicles how, as the country's first Prime Minister, he 'bungled' the Kashmir issue and evinced his lack of foresight by unilaterally taking it to the United Nations. Nehru's major domestic and foreign policies are severely criticized as being ill-conceived and utopian. Tharoor traces the reasons of his mistakes to his short sightedness:

_Dhrtrashtra was guilty only of the insincerity of the blind_ 51

The only credit that he gives to India's first Prime Minster is that he was despite his limitations and drawbacks, a true democrat.

The portrait of Indira Gandhi, the daughter of Nehru, too is presented in an unfavorable light. Though the narrative delineates her lonely and neglected childhood spent by the bedside of her perennially sick mother, she is cast in the role of female Duryodhan - Priya Duryodhani: an ironic combination of Indira Priyadarshini and Duryodhan. It is because of her arrogance, selfishness, scheming nature, intolerance and undemocratic instinct to eliminate her political rivals, she is conceived of as a modern counterpart of Dhrtrashtra's eldest child. The narrative shows how, after being elected as the Prime Minister following Lal Bahadur Shastri's death; she tried to entrench herself by implementing, with the help of the left and progressive parties in the parliament which were duped by her socialist rhetoric and lip-service to the poor and the downtrodden, a series of populist measures like bank nationalization that proved ultimately detrimental to the country's economics. She systematically undermined all the democratic institutions in the country and promoted the culture of empty slogans. The novel depicts how she 'smashed all the pillars and foundations' of 'the world's oldest anti-colonial political organization' 52, and allowed
herself to be 'surrounded by the recumbent forms of .... supplicants prostrating. Themselves amidst rubble' the political totalitarianism under Indira's rule is subjected to a cynical scrutiny in the narrative:

*Her Speech - writers peppered her rhetoric with dutiful obeisance to the wrenched of the Indian earth, she proclaimed her democratic pedigree and socialists convictions from every lectern and platform and she acquised more and more power in their names.... she squeezed the newsprint supplies of the press because they were 'out of touch' with the masses.... she fettered the judiciary by demanding they be 'committed' to the people.... she emasculated her party by appointing its state leaders rather than allowing them to be elected (for she alone could judge who best would serve the people."

The novel may provoke an Indian reader who holds the epic in high reverence and has high regard for the characters in it. G.N. Devi observes, "It does justice neither to the epic nor to the epoch" He extends his observation saying:

*This experimentation of clubbing together the modern Indian history -only political force and forces at that and the great Indian epic seems very contrived."

P.K. Rajan echoes the same sentiment:

*.... It only parodies myth in terms of contemporary facts, a method which is at times felt to be forced, arbitrary, contrived and artificial with the result that the parallelisms tend to be unconvincing or seem to crumble at certain crucial points."

The author of the novel makes his stand very clear: "I did not want to descend to the national tendency of hagiology" and states:

*I took heart from the conviction that irreverence in the Indian tradition is not sacrilege: the epic themselves ascribe human qualities, imperfections, base motives and feet of clay even to the gods. This prompted the humor, the puns and wordplay, the ironic tone of the book."
Being a post-colonial and post-modern text, Tharoor's novel encompasses intersexuality and interpolations covering a vast canvas of mythical and political events. The readers is left spell bound by striking comparisons and contrasts.

The author uses the myth to narrate his own story. He has many stories to tell and nothing to reveal at the same time. It is history:

*This story, like that of our country, is a story of betrayed expectations yours as much as our characters. There is no story and too many stories; there are no heroes and too many heroes what is left out matters as much as what is said.*

The Indian idea of history being cyclical, Tharoor suggests that history repeats itself offering new interpretations and new lessons. The author succinctly sums up the cyclical process of history. *The narrator tells Ganapathi:*

*Have I, you seem to be asking, come to the end of my story? How forgetful you are: it was just the other day I told you stories never end, they just continue somewhere else. In the hills and plains, the hearth and hearts of India.*

Towards the end of the novel, V.V.Ji realization that he had been narrating his tale from a wrong perspective altogether and his readiness to begin his tale all over again, "Let us begin again" reflects the novelist's perception of history.

*And the novel ends with the words with which it had begun thus establishing the circularity of the Kalachakra (the wheel of time) which goes on to render history, history less, to make fiction more real than fact and to establish that 'fact' is infact fiction.*

The *Mahabharata* has got parts of history and flashes of myth added to it and have been passed from generation to generation. Much
of fact and fiction is mingled in the process. Tharoor reworks the same ancient history and myth in his novel to unfold the twentieth century history. To state in Om. P. Juneja's words:

"By obliterating the line between myth and history through the metaphysics of the Mahabharat, the novelist exposes the falsity of the modernist fact-fiction binaries. He thus acquires the status of ithaskar."

Tharoor has cast the lights of ancient legends upon the events of relatively recent past.

"My various literary and less than literary devices serve an attempt to look at Indian political history through the refraction of two different kinds of light. One is of course the light cast by the past, by the values taught to us in our mythology, by the examples set by our legends. The other is the light cast by a satirical view of the present, which by deliberate simplification and fictionalization (one might even say conscious distortion) throw certain trends and issues into sharper relief than history makes possible."

The Indian way of writing history, includes the written as well as oral narratives that delineate the past. Tharoor employs oral and written narratives and myths into his version of the mythical tale.

He neither abides by history, nor sifts history from myths. He instead creates a new history/novel by scandalizing 'myth', 'history' and contemporary society.

**Mythology and Fantasy**

*The Great Indian Novel* derives its title not from the author's assessment of the book's content but in deference to its primary source of inspiration, the ancient epic and classical mythological text of the 'Mahabharata' is displacce and superimposed as a pretext upon a
historical narrative that reaches from the inception of the Indira Gandhi’s Emergency. As historical fiction Tharoor book thus roughly covers the same terrain as Midnight’s Children: the period from the emergence of Indian nationalism through the struggle for independence and its achievement, to the corruption of the nation-state that India has become. Indian Mythology becomes legible, at one level, as fundamentally different: not as a derivation of the modular form of European prime modernity but, in an emploatic version of the paradigm of the national as a rerun, or rather re-enactment, of the events codified in Mahabharata. Tharoor’s text is a narrative which hovers between satirisation and sacralization of the historical as a Mythology. The narrative structure aims at building a new nation on rational lines with changed political ideologies and changing political scenario. In the Nation and Narration Homi, K. Bhaba explains how the concept of nation is inextricably linked with the narrations of literature and consequently to the emotional and psychological integration of the hearts and minds of the people of given country.

Nations like narratives lose their origins in the myths of time and only fully realize their horizons in the mind's eye. Such an image of the nation - or narration - might seem impossibly romantic and excessively metaphorical, but it is from the traditions of political thought, and literary language that nation emerges as a powerful political ideas in the west.\textsuperscript{53}

Many twentieth century writers consciously used myth as a literary device in their works. The rediscovery of mythology as a repository of universal emotions and psychological types in the twentieth century prompted creative writers to evince a new interest in the ancient myths. One major reason of this renewed interest in myths was their

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timelessness and fundamental significance. John J White rightly said in his book ‘Mythology in the Modern Novel’…….

The return to myth is often assumed to be a particular feature of the Modernist movement in the early part of this century. Although many writers of the modernist era, including Eliot, Joyce, Kazantzakis, Pound and Yeats were certainly preoccupied with myths, such an interest is to be found with equal richness, and at times with a far Greater intricacy of expression, in much subsequent twentieth century Literature.64

Many twentieth century writers consciously used myth as a literary device in their works. The rediscovery of mythology as a repository of universal emotions and psychological types in the twentieth century prompted creative writers to evince a new interest in the ancient myths. One major reason of this renewed interest in myths was their timelessness and fundamental significance.

The critic also disarmingly identifies an important feature common to so many modern Mythological novels:

Rather than offer his reader new myths or revitalized old does, the mythological novelist present a modern situation and refers the reader to a familiar analogy.65

These mythological characteristics also underline many of modern Indian novels which have appropriated different Indian mythological territories as like in Shashi Tharoor 'The Great Indian Novel', in his novel he to Yoking of myth to history 66 to look at Indian through the refraction of two kinds of light the “light cast by a satirical view of the present.” 67 In The Great Indian Novel, he has invoked our memories of the Mahabharata, which has become an inseparable part of the Indian psyche, in a skillful manner. Indian history is able to resuscitate nearly all the essentials of the story of The Mahabharata as a

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more or less casually connected account, thus illuminating the
presentness of the past and the pastness of the present Jean claude
carriere, a foreigner, records the deep impression that the Mahabharata,
made upon him as “A part of Indian life as dwelling in the recesses of
your soul’. In modern post- independence Indian history, the
immanent spirit has been our commitment to democracy, except for its.
This short period seems to have cast a spell over the early Tharoor, for
he has variously handled it in his early novels (The Great Indian Novel,
and show business) and a two act play “Soul” In modern post-
independence Indian history, the immanent spirit has been our
commitment to democracy.

In The Great Indian Novel Shashi Tharoor has dealt with the
theme extensively against not only a much broader canvas of history but
has also highlighted its inner contradictions by attempting a sort of
archetypal montage by presenting it as being is a contemporary
Mahabharata, with its large gallery of characters, narrated by Ved
Vyasa who is modernized not only in his name as "V.V.Ji' but also in his
ironically ambivalent and varied strategies of narration. The
cantankerous old narrator doodles with the narrative and with himself as
the narrator, almost like a modernist writer deconstructing both him and
the tale he is telling. His object is to weave and unweave, sew and tear
the political history of India from about the beginning of the twentieth
century to the end of the Emergency and what follows it. All this is done
by attempting to view it through the changing filters of irony which
clarify and interpret the contemporary political characters and events in
lights varying from the most humorous to the most repulsive. Moreover,
the narrator is neither sure, of the ground on which he stands nor of the

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true nature of the objects and events be writes about. The only certitude
is that there are no certitudes. He calls his view "ambivalent." It might
perhaps be better called multivalent for he says:

I knew that in India there were really no blacks no whites; nor
was there a uniformly dingy grey. Instead, political morality
and public values were a mystical, blurred, swirling optical
illusion of alternating blacks and whites in different.

There is another difficulty too. Archetypal characters and events
tend to reappear, but not all do so, nor in the same order or relationships.
Hence, Shashi Traroor's novel can be 'Mahabharata' only partially and
that too not without a Great deal of stretching and manipulation making
the parallels only partially applicable. But all the same, it must be said to
his credit that the he has generally got over these difficulties and while
rendering the spirit of 'The Mahabharata' with a fair amount of truth
and vitality the author and the narrator are both conscious of the gulfs
that separate an epic age from an underdeveloped country of the
twentieth century. The contrasts are sometimes too glaring, but he has
tried to get over them or made the best use of them by bridging the gulf
with a narrative of an irreverent of humorous vein, for incongruity is
regarded to be the soul of humour. In this way, the Post independence

Indian politics seems to have been interpreted as fluctuation in the
fortunes of Draupadid Mokrasi i.e. D. Mokrasi (Democracy). It is after
the death of Dhritastra (Jawaharlal Nehru, the Great 'visionary'
democrat who with his eyes fixed at the stars, failed to see the dangers
and pitfalls right under his nose) and the coming into power of his
daughter Priya Duryodhani (a clever alteration of 'Indira
Priyadarshini') that D. Mokrasis's problems begin. Priya Duryodhani's
revolt against the old Guard of the Kaurav Party (The congress), her

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suggested marriage (in V.V.Ji's dream) with Eklavya (V.V.Giri), the
decision to hold a 'Swayamvara' in which only Arjun (the press) is able
to meet the challenge of opening the huge ballot box in which she
stands, thus becoming her natural guardian. In the 'Swayamvara'
(outside V.V.Ji's dream), D. Mokrasi chooses Arjuna in the modern
ambience of a coffee house or a seminar.

The approach to the Emergency is subtly traced from the rise of
Priya Duryodhani who gradually consolidates her power and popularity.
The important political steps she takes meet with D. Mokhrasi's
appropriate responses. Duryodhani's appointment of Yudhishtir (Morarji
Desai) as Dy. Prime Minister and sharing power with him makes D.
Mokarasi a little plump.\(^1\) while his resignation makes her sick\(^2\), only to
be revived a little by Yudhisthir's resignation in protest from the Kaurav
working committee.\(^3\) She again relapses into minor ailments at the
'resignation' of 'the gentle Muslim Academic' (Zakir Hussain) from
Presidency.\(^4\) and the ascending of Eklavya (V.V. Giri), Duryodhani's
nominee, to it.\(^5\) The transparency of Duryodhani's hollow slogan
"Remove Poverty" makes D. Mokrasi asthmatic.\(^6\) Good health,
however, returns to her after the hacking of Karnistan (Pakistan) into
two parts and the formation of Gelabi Desh (Bangladesh).\(^7\) But all is not
well in the country the Emergency of Jayaprakash Drona (Jayaprakash
Narayan) from his retreat to lead a popular uprising against
Duryodhani's inability to keep her pledges of eradicating all the natural
evils including poverty and a court's judgment finding her guilty of
electoral malpractices, the natural corollary of which should have been
her resignation. At this critical moment appears Shakuni Shankar Dey
(here apparently a composite picture of Sidhartha Shankar Ray and

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Sanjay Gandhi) to advise her to impose a state of 'Internal siege' (Internal Emergency) in which she can detain all the leaders of the uprising and also censor the press. It is when the Internal siege has been proclaimed that we enter the real struggle of the 'Mahabharata' the struggle between good and evil respectively by D. Mokrasi (Democracy) on the one hand and ruthless Priya Duryodhani's (Indira Gandhi's) dictatorship on the other.

The central events of the 'Mahabharata' are rooted in two main 'battles' - (i) the game of dice, after which a futile attempt is made to disrobe D. Mokrasi, the Pandavas receive a sentence of exile followed by a year of exile in hiding, and (ii) the main battle of Kurukshetra which witnesses the deaths of numerous Great warriors including all the members of the Kaurav party. With his hatred of a nauseous and sadistic totalitarian rule unwilling to share power or give away even a part of it to its rightful heirs, Shashi Tharoor links both these important "battle" to the Emergency one to its tyrannical exercise and the other to the final battle which extinguishes it.

Rightly ascribed to VV.ji's dreams is the game of dice representing the descript, falsehood, unashamed cruelty and persecution characteristic of the critical situation (Emergency). The crushing of all the rights of the individual, including the right of privacy, is presented through the attempted disrobing of D. Mokrasi, who from her earlier role of a concerned observer now becomes its chief victim. In the earlier episodes tracing the contours of the Emergency, it is largely irony that predominates, whereas this episode of the game of dice is dominated by anger, pity and despair. This seems to be the central episode of the novel, for it presents an unambiguous condemnation of autocracy and a
cruel and direct trampling of democracy which was only tangentially and phonetically suggested by calling Indira Gandhi as Priya Duryodhani and democracy as D. Mokrasi while V.V.Ji's representation of the actual battle of Kurukshetra would have, presented difficult ethical complexities, in addition to numerous practical difficulties which shall be considered later. It is not that there are no such difficulties in the presentation of the game of dice. Before or during the Emergency there was no conflict between Indira Gandhi and three of the Pandavas representing the army, bureaucracy and the diplomatic services (represented by Bhim, Nakul and Sahadeva respectively). The court verdict which triggered of the Emergency also has no mythological parallel. At most there was no political struggle by Jayapakash Narayan (Drona, Duryodhana's guru!). Among the Pandavas only one, i.e. Arjun (the press) was demanding Indira Gandhi's resignation. And among the important progenitors, both political and biological, Gandhiji (Gangaji or Gangaputra, i.e. Bhishma Pitamha), Jawaharlal Nehru (Dhritrashtra) and few others were not there to witness the disrobing. Karna (Jinnah) had long ago left for the country of his own creation and then for the other world. Thus the political contours of the India of the middle seventies of the twentieth century were quite different from those of the mythological game of dice as embedded in the traditional psyche.

Shashi Tharoor has deftly solved this difficulty by employing the dream strategy which while having some recognizable links between myth and reality allows him ample scope for employing all the inventiveness of plot and character without the danger of being charged with the irony of a modern Ved Vyasa (V.V.Ji) appearing as one who can afford the smile of the amusement of one who has kept watch over man's morality and
knows the reality as a sphere which he understands thoroughly from all angles and can play with it and recast at will the whole narration from new Perspectives. V.V.Ji, while being modern in his ambivalence (and also a true representative of the age of 'Dwapara' an age of doubts and ambiguities) is at the same time like the lord, playing a willing role in his own creation. He gives us ironic peppery slice of modern history with jams of fantasy and dream.

But India is not a banana republic or an Arab country where democracy has no deep roots which can almost permanently be replaced by dictatorship. Here democracy cannot be suppressed for long:

_No Ganapathi, Draupadi was Indian; she was ours, and she had to wear a sari. We could not place her in universal beauty contests to be judged as her occidental sisters were, by the shape of her legs or the cut of her costume. If she had been wearing the skirts or dresses or even the trousers of Western democratic women, she might have been far easily disrobed._

After a temporary quiet period, Indian democracy tends to rise again from her ashes the sparks of which were in fact never extinguished. The harsh and totally underserved sentence of a long exile passed against her five husbands may perhaps be interpreted as the brushing aside of the independence of the chief organs of a democratic government. All these selected details of the insensitive functioning of the bulldozer of the Emergency affects the lives of the common people with equal ruthlessness wards a license for the police to do whatever they like - forced completion of sterilization - quotas, blind slum - clearance for the so-called urban renewal, increase in unemployment caused by the so-called supremacy of an unrepresentative and frightened
parliament as an instrument of Duryodhani's parliamentary dictatorship, and the abolition of the freedom of the press.

After abbreviating the long years of exile and the protracted negotiations of peace conducted by Krishna into about a year and a half, the narrator quickly makes Duryodhani unthinkingly jump into the General Election which is "a contemporary Kurukshetra." In fact, Kurukshetra is universal and eternal:

There was good and bad, dishonor and treachery betrayal and death, on both sides. There was no glorious victory at Kurukshetra. This election is not kurukshetra; life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra, the struggle between dharma and adharma is struggle our nation, and each of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence.

Yet this Kurukshetra is non-traditional for the issue is “the rout or the restoration of democracy”.

I saw the meaning of Independence come pulsating to life as unlettered peasants rose in the villages to pledge their votes for democracy. I saw journalists younger than the constitution relearn the meaning of freedom by discovering what they had lost when the word was erased from their notebooks. I saw Draupadi’s face glowing in the open, the flame of her radiance burning more brightly than ever. And I knew that it had all been worthwhile.

The Gita, preceding the actual battle, is represented as the advice of Krishna parthasarathy (Lord Krishna) to Arjun (the press) who is bedeviled by doubts whether to fill the nomination paper as a candidate or just keep writing The famous conversation takes place in Ashok Hotel where V.V.ji, the narrator, sitting at the next table, overhears and records it. The concluding part of Krishna’s speech contains among others, significant words.
So Arjun, stop doubting: rise serve, India serve me the embodiment of the spirit of the nation.⁸²

At last Arjun decides to get the opposition into an electoral pact.

The details of the battle of Kurukshetra (the General Election of 1977) have been completely ignored except in its conclusion, the defeat of Priya Duryodhani, largely because of the arrows of sharp criticism shot by Arjun (the press). The ignoring of the actual battle obviously flows from the imposition of an archetypal framework on the twentieth century Indian politics resulting in the absence of a number of important warriors from the ‘battle’. Gangaputra Bhishma (Gandhiji) and Karna (Jinnah) could not be presented as alive and fighting in 1977, and Jayaprakash Drona (Jayaprakash Narayan), could not have led his forces or even fought for her. The Gita has been fairly well rendered in a modern ambience in Ashok Hotel, but there is no Dhritrashtra (Jawaharlal Nehru) to rule over the Kingdom or to hear the Gita and to learn about the battle through the ears and eyes of Sanjay. In fact, his daughter was the only rulers. It is unnecessary to prolong the list of such anomalies which make the presentation of the battle of Kurukshetra (General Election) impossible. And an election reassembles a battle only metaphorically. It is the two main leaders and the result which are important, and they have been presented faithfully and forcefully.

Priya Duryodhani’s defeat is well deserve and complete. But the narrator’s ambivalence is apparent even in these episodes, which ought to have been unmistakably white and black, but are not so. They are enveloped in a grey irony. The periods of ‘democracy’ which precede and follow the Emergency are not spotless. The popular government that follows the Emergency is not spotless either. It does not herald any joy

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or enthusiasm, because it is beset with weaknesses. Even ‘Dharmaraj’ Yudhistir (Morarji Desai) has made himself not an object of veneration but of amusement, because of his openly practicing and preaching ‘auto-urine therapy’ and his odd dietician preferences.

The emergency, as portrayed in the novel, is not followed by a period too glorious or hopeful for the country. And the Emergency itself is perhaps not as black as it is often portrayed to be. Possibly this factor along with the disenchantment of the people with the type of ‘democratic’ government that replaces the Emergency leads to the return of ‘Priya Duryodhani’ to the throne after a brief period of three years.

The event of the novel viewed with a binary vision – contemporary and mythological, realistic and imaginary, serious and ironical are reflected in techniques of realistic descriptions and dreams of the narrator. The Emergency itself, however condemned, had much merit in it. V.V.Ji believes that it saved the people from ‘the political chaos in the country, fuelled by Drona’s idealistic but confused uprising which a variety of political opponents had joined and exploited, and could have led the country nowhere but to anarchy’. 83 Moreover, there was the twenty-point programmed, “a new sense of purpose where earlier there had been drift and uncertainty” 84, the officialdom acquired a new work ethic to serve the common man far more effectively than ever before.” 85 I had no doubt, says the narrator, “that more Indians would benefit from the abolition of bonded labor and the implementation of land reforms than would suffer from the censorship of articles however well Arjun could write them.” 86

_The declaration of the Siege, the arrests of the agitators, the silence in the streets, had been accepted by non-political India_

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without a murmur. The only sound that replaced the months of clamor appeared to be the deflating hiss of a long public sigh of relief.\textsuperscript{87}

The people accept ‘the loss of their politics without demur.’\textsuperscript{88} Moreover, as V.V.Ji demonstrates through a parable, “We Indian are notoriously good at being resigned to our lot.”\textsuperscript{89} Like that man in the parable, a symbol of India, who falling from the wood – mice eaten branch of a tree under which a tiger is waiting for him, into a well full of hissing snakes, makes the best of his lot by licking up a gleaming drop of honey on a solitary blade of grass growing on the wall of the well and in the last moment of his life attempts to obviate by a drop of honey the deadly snake – venom about to be injected into him.\textsuperscript{91} The people of India similarly accept their lot without caring for what lies behind the delightful screen of the better work-ethic.

_The Prime Minister ruled like a goddess: black to liberal democrats, black to her political opponents... White to adoring impervious sansculottes at rural public meetings, white also to contented corpulent capitalists... It was a complex spectrum of blacks, whites and fluid greys. Brahminical ambivalence was therefore nothing to be ashamed of._\textsuperscript{91}

The novel in its ironic and irreverent tone, in its shifting of moods and its multivalent portrayal of the political scene seems to illustrate the Vedantic view put forth by Maharshi Vyas (not V.V.Ji’ of the Novel) himself that the world is a “Leela’ of the divine principle it seems to be a dance of Verities. ‘Dharma’ is a Spherical whole which can be viewed and interpreted from different angles. It is another discourse on untiy in diversity. “It would seem from the newspapers that Indian life consists almost exclusively of a bewildering variety of forms of political behavior.”\textsuperscript{92} Perhaps it is this that makes Shashi Tharoor Say:

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I judged a degree of irreverence to be essential is the telling. I took heart from the conviction that irreverence in the Indian tradition is not sacrilege: the epics themselves ascribe human qualities, imperfections, base motives and feet of clay even to the gods. This prompted the humour, the puns and wordplay, the ironic tone of the book – all serving to say, “look this novel does not take itself too seriously, but it wants you to judge for yourself what you wish to take seriously from it.”

The novel is a powerful political statement in favor of both individual and national liberty, though at the deeper levels of man’s personality it presents ambivalence. Dharma, as the novelist asserts, is multifaceted.

If there is a message to the book, it is two fold.... to reexamine all the received wisdom about India second, to do so through a reassertion of dharma, defined not just as religion but as the whole complex of values and standards – some derived for myth and tradition, some derived from our history by which India and Indians must live.

This ‘Dharma’, a complex of ambivalence, a prism of values and standards, which runs through our mythology and history, and though dissolved and diffused into body politic, is sparkingly crystallized primarily in its political dimensions, in Shashi Tharoor's Portrayal of the Emergency, which represents a convergence of a vast mythological space into a few decades of modern history by means of a identification of a few years and characters as analogues to their mythical archetypes.

To sum up, in its portrayal of the Emergency through a tale of ‘Dwapara’ (an age of doubts and ambiguities), the novels achievement is unique, for it demonstrates that though there are “multiple realities and multiple interpretations of reality” ‘Dharma’ in all its connotations, is the bedrock which sustains mankind and any violation of it is bound to recoil on its perpetrator sooner or later, that both history

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and mythology, being creations of man's action and imagination, tend to run somewhat parallel to each other, that though the creation may be a “Leela”, the amusement it produces is ‘the fine delight that father thought’, for Tharoor’s novels as “didactic does masquerading are entertainment.96

It is amazing how his treatment of an extremely transitory historical event like the Emergency is loaded with so much profundity of reflection which may easily be missed because of its satirical and merry frolics though time and imagination.
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10) Ibid., P.18.

11) Ibid., P.18.

12) Ibid., P.19.

13) Ibid., P..21.

14) Ibid., P..24.

15) Ibid., P..25.

16) Ibid., P..28.

17) Ibid., P.30.

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18) Ibid., P..31.
19) Ibid., P.66.
20) Ibid., P.66.
21) Ibid., P..199.
26) Ibid., P.5.
28) Ibid., P.89.
29) Ibid., P.86.
30) Ibid., P.18.
34) Ibid., P. 383.
35) Ibid., P. 313.
36) Ibid., P. 164.
37) Ibid., P. 109.

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38) Ibid., P.245.
41) Ibid., P. 95.
42) Ibid., P.95.
45) Ibid., P.222.
46) Ibid., P.105.
47) Ibid., P.142.
48) Ibid., P.234.
49) Ibid., P.133.
50) Ibid., P.85.
52) Ibid., P.351.
53) Ibid., P.351.
54) Ibid., P.357.
59) Ibid., P.418.
61) Ibid., 19-59.
65) Ibid., P.23.
70) Ibid., P.368.
71) Ibid., P.342.

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73) Ibid., P.345.
74) Ibid., P.347.
75) Ibid., P.348.
76) Ibid., P.352.
77) Ibid., P 350.
78) Ibid., P.385.
79) Ibid., P.391.
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82) Ibid., P.397-98.
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87) Ibid., P.370.
88) Ibid., P.371.
89) Ibid., P.371.
90) Ibid., PP.371-72.
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92) Ibid., P.370.
94) Ibid., P.8.
96) Ibid., P.8.