CHAPTER IV

THE MODERN KURUKSHETRA

In *Matigari*, Ngugi was not only referring to the African context, but also very consciously making it universal in its appeal by telling the reader/listener to set it in the country of his choice. Shashi Tharoor on the other hand is focusing on the particular -- the Indian context, though in the spinning of his tale, he may be illustrating universal truths. To understand *The Great Indian Novel*, one must be well informed about Indian history from the beginning of the freedom struggle to the reign of Indira Gandhi. The reader must also be well informed about the characters in the *Mahabharata* and the main events in the epic. This foreknowledge is necessary to fully appreciate the thoroughness of Tharoor's research and his insights into the truths of history and myth. Intertextuality is a significant feature of this novel and one can see reader response theories at work in the act of deriving meaning from the text.

Tharoor both fictionalizes history and mythicizes it. Important historical events are delineated, like the Salt March, the Indigo workers
strike, the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre, the Quit India Movement, the conflicts within the Congress Party, the Partition of India, the Nehru and Indira Gandhi era, the Bangladesh War of Independence and so on. Fictionalizing is a process that includes selection, distortion, telescoping, exaggeration, deflation and invention. For example, the Salt March becomes the Mango March. Exaggeration and deflation are used for the purpose of satire and humour. By using the tone of irreverence almost throughout the novel, Tharoor undermines the seriousness of both history and myth. This tonal distortion is the characteristic of the mock epic.

History is mythicized in many ways. The simple technique of using names that figure in the mythological epic *Mahabharata* is a starting point. What is striking however, are the numerous parallels in character as well as incident that seem to dovetail so naturally. Tharoor has succeeded in finding remarkable parallels between the important figures in recent Indian history and characters in the *Mahabharata*. These parallels help to fuse myth and history resulting in the fictionalizing of both. There is a broad matching of incident as well, but in the delineation of the finer details of both history and myth Tharoor is forced to resort to straight narration and it is here that the use of names helps him to link up one with the other.

The mythicizing of history forces the reader to look afresh at both the original myth and the historical fact and engages the reader in a reinterpretation of both. Whenever something is distorted, the mind spontaneously harks back to the original so that the distortion attains clarity. Ultimately the original is viewed afresh, often with a new, a different
Tharoor uses the structure of the *Mahabharata*. The epic is divided into eighteen *parvas* or books, but they are of unequal length. This basic structure is accepted even though there is disagreement among the scholars as to what the later additions and interpolations are. Many of the *parvas* are named after an important character and Tharoor tries to give emphasis to one of the key players in Indian history in each of his books. He must necessarily move back and forth in time as a result. The *parvas* are divided into chapters and the books in Tharoor's novel have numbered sections. The eighteen books in Tharoor's novel have titles that are a play on the titles of well known novels in English literature some examples being, 'The Duel With the Crown', 'The Raj Quartet', 'Midnight's Parents', 'The Man Who would not be King', 'Passages Through India', 'The Bungle Book' and so on. Since Tharoor's novel is a mock epic as well as a parody of two traditions of writing, the titles are a critical comment in themselves.

The *Mahabharata* is categorized as belonging to the *ithihasa- purana* tradition, or it is history/legend. It contains no doubt, the socio-political and cultural history of ancient India, preserved in the oral bardic tradition for centuries together. Many scholars believe that Vyasa composed a poem called
*Jaya* consisting of 8,800 verses and this was taught to his son and disciples. It is thought that two versions emerged as a result, the Vaishampayana version and the Jaimini version. Only fragments remain of the second version. To most Indians the *Mahabharata* is not an imaginary tale but a record of real events that took place about 1000 BC. Iravati Karve's book *Yuganta* (1969) discusses the socio-political aspects of the epic, from the perspective that it is real history. The epic however, as a conglomeration of history, legend, myth, parable, didactic tales, philosophic and scientific treatises, poetics, ethics and so on. Tharoor is aware of the complexity of the work and amorphous nature of the text in the oral tradition. In the section where he deals with the exile of the Pandavas, he says, "...old women will tell stories that their daughters and nieces will cherish and repeat and pass on like precious oral heirlooms; the legends grew of these five wanderers who came and did their good deeds and went. The stories always developed in the telling, being modified and embellished by each teller, so that eventually the details differed so greatly from one village's version to the next's that they might have been tales of totally different people..." (292).

The *Mahabharata* can therefore be seen as the mythicized version of ancient history. To this is added another dimension when the text is held sacred and becomes a part of the mythic consciousness of the race. More than the *Vedas*, the two great epics of India, the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* have moulded the psyche and imagination of the Indian people. The two texts provide a rich source of mythical archetypes in both character and incident. The Indian mind cannot think of righteous conduct without thinking of
Yudhishtir, a man of exemplary virtue dedicated to action without thinking of Arjuna. A man of great strength is always a Bhima, of strong will, a Bhishma. A reign of truth and justice is Ramarajya and a battle between good and evil is Kurukshetra. Tharoor exploits these archetypal patterns and is able to find parallels between the epic and modern Indian history. Yet by doing so he desacralizes the epic.

Tharoor uses a number of narrative strategies to depict history as mythology. The narrator's voice is that of Vyasa, as in the Mahabharata. Vyasa played a part in the events and was an eye-witness to many of them. Iravati Karve points out that Vyasa was believed to be a chranjiva, a word which can be translated to mean 'ever alive' or 'an immortal', and this is adventitious, for Tharoor makes it appear that he is once again at the task of recording history. (A Western parallel would be Tiresias who knows all and sees all.) As in the original, Vyasa asks Ganesha to be his amanuensis. The difference is in tone, for here we feel that he is an old bureaucrat with an unfailing sense of humour.

Tharoor has chosen the framework of the Mahabharata to depict the epic scope of modern Indian history—the tumultuous changes that were wrought for India and Britain in the first few decades of this century. The epic focuses on the conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas that resulted in the battle of Kurukshetra. The novel focuses on the conflict between the Indians and the British that resulted in the break-up of the empire. If Kurukshetra is seen as the symbolic struggle between good and evil, India's struggle can be seen as the epic conflict between the forces of
nationalism and imperialism, the consequences of which are being worked out even today. If the Kurukshetra war engulfed all the adjoining kingdoms in this part of the world, the fight against imperialism has touched every other colonized nation in every part of the world.

Such a theme sounds both prodigious and ponderous but what Tharoor has produced is a work that sparkles with wit and humour. By using the irreverent tone for a serious theme, he writes a mock-epic that is reminiscent of Fielding, Sterne, Swift and Pope. The narrative modes however are typically Indian. The epic in India has no rigid rules of form, its amorphous nature being the outcome of the oral tradition that permitted accretions as it passed from one generation to another. The strict rules regarding the purity of the text as it applied to the Vedas did not operate in this instance. There are many tales complete in themselves embedded in the epic, many digressions, a moving back and forth that is inescapable in the telling of the lives and happenings of so many characters. Tharoor uses this technique to advantage as he has to deal with the complex happenings of the Independence Movement. “The trouble with telling a tale in an epic scale is that sometimes you neglect the characters in the foreground as you admire the broad sweep of the landscape you are painting, just as the overall picture fades occasionally from sight when you focus closely on the smudgy details of individual impressions”(361-362). Tharoor makes frequent references to the art of narration, a self-reflexivity that is typically post-modern. He calls his own narrative “history by anecdote”(141).
The *Mahabharata* is the story of how the Treta Yuga, the third stage in the cosmic cycle ended, ushering in the Kali Yuga. The Indian concept of time and history is cyclic, a span of 64,000 years completing one cycle. The broad patterns or characteristics of the ages repeat themselves and so there is really no beginning or end. Tharoor’s narrative technique as well as his philosophic outlook in the novel rest on this fundamental concept. The epic tale deals with the lives of three generations of the Kaurava clan and we see how the main characters meet their end. We even follow the Pandavas on their last journey into the Himalayas, see Yudhishtir’s encounter with Yama or the God of Death, and the way in which he upholds his principles even in the netherworld. Yet we are at the same time aware that a new saga will shape itself as they leave Parikshit, Arjun’s grandson on the throne. No story has an ending. Tharoor makes Vyasa discuss this with his amanuensis Ganapathi. He recalls the time when his grandson asked him to tell a story and the child typically asks, “But Dadaji, what happened in the end?” The question leaves the great story teller bewildered, for, what happened next he could answer, but what happened in the end he could not. He says, “... the story does not end when the screen writer pretends it does. It does not even end with the great symbol of finality, death...” (163). That there is no beginning and no end is a truth that every Indian instinctively knows says Vyasa and ‘the end’ is nothing but an arbitrary invention of the teller. Life is nothing but a series of sequels to history.

The story therefore progresses as so many cycles of events sometimes focusing on one hero and sometimes on another. There are many heroes in
the *Mahabharata* and Tharoor is able to locate the many leaders of the freedom struggle within the epic framework. "In the olden days, our epic narrators thought nothing of leaving a legendary hero stranded in mid-conquest while digressing into sub-plots, with stories, fables and anecdotes in each. But these, Ganapathi, are more demanding times. The only interruptions they will stand for these days are catchy numbers sung by gyrating starlets." The narrative technique in the novel resembles closely the technique of the epic.

The appropriateness of using the *Mahabharata* as a framework can be seen in the surprisingly large number of correspondences in situation as well as character. Tharoor delights in working out even some minor details, but there is room here only for a discussion of the important ones. The first step in the process of transforming Indian history into a mythical tale is in the use of names. Hastinapur is the setting, and this becomes one of the princely states in pre-independent India. The politics of intrigue and rivalry and internecine conflict in the Hastinapur of the epic matches that in the Congress Party. The Kaurava clan was split into two, the Pandavas and the Kauravas led by Duryodhana. The anti-imperialist movement is split into two in modern India, one led by the Congress and the other by the Muslim league, but the Pandava-Kaurava identities are developed differently in the novel. Another correspondence which Tharoor makes use of is the fact that any princely state that had no male heir was annexed by the British. The root of all the troubles in the *Mahabharata* lies in the inability of the Kuru line to produce a royal heir. King Santanu dies, and leaves behind two sons,
one of whom is killed in a quarrel and the other dies before producing an heir to the throne. In effect, the line is extinct. Through the machinations of Bhishma and Satyavati, Vyasa, who was a son born to Satyavati before she became queen, is summoned to function as surrogate husband to the two young widows and Dhritarashtra and Pandu are born—one blind and the other pale. Tharoor utilizes this part of the tale to show how important it was for India to produce worthwhile sons who could don the mantle of leadership when independence was won. India's destiny was dependent on leaders like the blind Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and the ruthless Duryodani (Indira Gandhi). The inadequacy of the leaders in both the epic and modern India leads the author to say, “What a story it was. A story of India: of the decadence and debauchery of the princes, of the imperatives and illusions of power; of the strengths of secular politics and internationalist principle. An Indian story, with so many possible preambles and no conclusion” (261).

While there is one major conflict between the Pandavas and the Kauravas in the Mahabharata that leads to the Kurukshetra war, there are two major conflicts in Indian history that Tharoor has to fit into the framework. One is between India and Britain as the colonial power that has to be ousted, the other is the Hindu-Muslim conflict. Tharoor is alert to the attitudinal differences and the emotional outcomes of the two conflicts. Exploitation and injustice are concomitant with imperialism. Nevertheless, every Indian must admit the fact that the institution of parliamentary democracy, the judicial system, the post and telegraph, and railways are things we owe to the British. To depict the British as the Kauravas would
have some drawbacks. To depict the Indian National Congress as the Pandavas would falsify some of its weaknesses. Britain then, is represented by Viscount Drewpad and his wife Georgina, the Resident Sir Richard and the marvelously amusing Heaslop. The selection of Drewpad helps him with his depiction of Draupadi as a symbol of democracy, for in the epic, Draupadi emerges from the sacrificial fire. Out of the turmoil of imperialism and nationalism, democracy emerged. The hybrid nature of our culture is suggested by the fact that Georgina visited Dhritarashtra several times and when an infant girl was born, "bearing the indeterminate pink and brown colouring of her mixed parentage", she was handed over to a low caste woman to be looked after. This also suggests the special relationship between Nehru and Edwina.

If Hastinapur is representative of India, then the Kauravas must needs represent the Indian National Congress. It was the Kaurava clan that split and gave the Pandavas a separate identity. Tharoor uses this to show that the ideals of the Congress Party and the ideals of the institutions of parliamentary democracy are never fully realized because of the inherent weaknesses of the leaders themselves. This split between concept and reality becomes the split in the Kaurava clan. While Draupadi represents democracy, her five husbands represent the institutions that support democracy, Yudhishtir is the ideal leader, judicious and just, Bhima who symbolizes strength and integrity is likened to the army; Arjun the one who can fight for the right is the free press, Nakul and Sahadev represent the services. Tharoor therefore exploits the tendency to render the mythological
characters as archetypes, or symbols. The fictionalizing process however gives Tharoor the flexibility to shift and play around with the identity value, to suit the particular context. The man at the helm of affairs is Nehru, who becomes the blind Dhritarashtra. In reassessing the contribution of Nehru to the development of India, one has become more aware of the deficiencies and short-sightedness of his policies and to make him blind seems appropriate. While in the epic, Dhritarashtra tacitly supports Duryodhana’s ambition for power, it is Nehru’s daughter Indira Gandhi who becomes Priya Duryodhani in the novel, and she is groomed for power by her father.

The parallels between the characters in the epic and in Indian history are surprisingly numerous. Bhishma earned this name because of the terrible vow he took to please his father. He vowed not to marry or to lay claim to the throne as crown prince. This is what Satyavati’s father demanded before he would let his daughter marry the king. Bhishma’s own mother was the goddess Ganga herself and hence he is also known as Gangaputra. Tharoor makes use of the custom of adding the suffix ‘ji’ to show respect and so his name in the novel becomes Gangaji, a name that is phonologically similar to Gandhiji. The modern father of the nation is likened to the patriarch of the Kuru clan Gangaputra. Like Bhishma, Gandhi also renounced sex as part of his experiments in spiritual growth. Bhishma acted as regent until Dhritarashtra and Pandu grew up and even thereafter, was the elder who was always consulted in matters of state. In the novel, Gangaji is regent of Hastinapur, and he helps to guide the independence struggle, and mould leaders like Nehru, Patel and Vinoba Bhave. Bhishma
took up the generalship of the Kaurava army. He repeatedly advised Duryodhana to negotiate. This is akin to Gandhi's effort to mediate between the Hindus and the Muslims. Just as Bhishma could not stop the war, Gandhi could not stop the communal riots and the partition of India. "Gangaji refused to be reconciled to the new reality. He walked in vain from riot-spot to riot-spot, trying to put out the conflagration through expressions of reason and grief. But the old magic was gone... History was catching up with itself and it was running out of breath"(211). Significantly Tharoor does not make Gandhiji's last words "Hare Ram" but "I... have... failed"(234). In an important sense, both Bhishma and Gandhi had failed.

There cannot be a one to one correspondence in all the historical events. There is variety in the handling of the events in Gandhi's life. The civil disobedience movement and Gandhi's views on satyagraha are given importance. The Jallianwallah Bagh massacre is here spoken of as the Bibighar rally and the Hastinapur massacre. This is an instance of telescoping of events in history into a meaningful new one. Gandhi's part in the worker's strike, his fight against the indigo laws are all depicted in Tharoor's inimitable style. The famous Salt March becomes the Mango March. The irreverent tone affects not only the mythological aspect but also the historical aspect of the narrative. History has been transmuted into humorous fiction. In the narration of such historical events, the only link to the mythological tale is the name Gangaji. Yet we have seen enough correspondences in the character to feel that if Bhishma had been born in this era, he would perhaps be like this.
One important incident from mythology that Tharoor tries to integrate into the narrative is the story of Amba-Shikandin. Tharoor alters the details of Gandhi's assassination and Shikandin becomes the Godse of the novel. The elaborate attention paid to the context shows that it is not just Godse or any disaffected or disgruntled group, but the agony of failure itself that is personified in Shikandin. The haggard man, who coughs into a blood-stained handkerchief, holds the side of his stomach as if to keep his guts from falling out. "The butcher who unmade my womanhood hasn't left me much time," he says. While this introduces the sex change that is found in the epic, it also reminds us of the atrocities committed on women during the partition. "Look at the mess you have made. You don't still want to live, do you?" Amba Shikandin asked, indicating with a sweep of his hand, the mess that India was. Gangaji looked steadily at his nemesis and slowly, wearily, emotionlessly shook his head. The bullet finds its target, and in the last moments, a little boy called Arjun comes up and gives Ganges water from Hastinapur. While this is a common ritual among the Hindus, we are reminded of the myth in the other details. The ghastly incident produces nightmares for the narrator, who sees several arrows, not bullets, pierce Gangaji and using the technique of dream narration, Tharoor evokes the image of Bhishma lying on the bed of arrows and Arjun sending an arrow into the earth from which Ganga sprang up to quench the thirst of Bhishma.

In the depiction of Gandhiji, Tharoor not only shows admiration for the man, but infuses the portrait with his typical sense of humour. The initial description is an example. This is the time when "good old Ganga
"Katta" is still the regent of Hastinapur. "Gangaji, a man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already looking balder than I am today, peering at you through round-rimmed glasses... he was by now beginning to shed part or most of even his traditional robes on all but state occasions. People were forever barging into his study unexpectedly and finding him in nothing but a loin-cloth. 'Excuse me, I was just preparing myself an enema,' he would say with a feeble smile as if that explained everything. In fact, as you can imagine, it only added to the confusion."(36).

The description of Gandhiji having tea with the Viceroy where he explains his dream about the cow and the reason why he drinks goat's milk is hilarious. Sarah-bhen rises and pours him a cup of goat's milk from a tiffin carrier. The bearer comes in pushing the tea trolley, its filigreed top-rack all but obscured by lace doilies on which were plates of cucumber sandwiches. Smiling impishly, Gangaji says that he has brought his own food, and out of the folds of his garment, he produces a small golden ripe mango. This parody of both the historical and mythological characters has the effect of debunking both. Such a narrative strategy plays an important part in the effort of the creative artist in decolonizing the mind.

Dhritarashtra, in the Mahabharata, is portrayed as a weak, vacillating and ineffectual blind king who could neither control nor give direction to his numerous sons. That Nehru, who had earned the affection and esteem of the masses should be depicted as Dhritarashtra may seem incongruous to some. But it is appropriate for many reasons. Nehru was too idealistic and blind in many ways. His policy of friendship toward China left
the nation totally unprepared for the Chinese invasion and Tharoor does not gloss over the fact that our ill-equipped soldiers died because of this. Nehru's socialism has left the nation with huge loss making public sector enterprises that have drained the economy of much needed resources. His Kashmir policy was disastrous and generations of Kashmiris have suffered because of this. Besides this, if Pandu can be seen as Sardar Patel, then the rivalry and differences between them form a convenient parallel to those between Pandu and Dhritarashtra in the epic. Tharoor does not forgive the deficiencies in Nehru's policies and in this respect he makes a more realistic analysis of the Nehru era. The novel therefore debunks the myth about Nehru created in the official version of history. Besides this, Nehru was influenced by people like Krishna Menon (Kanika Menon in the novel) who is likened to Shakuni, the evil genius and adviser to Duryodhana in the Mahabharata. Tharoor's criticism of the Nehru era is summed up in a line when he says that Dhritarashtra, the adoptive father of Draupadi Mokrasi, left her nothing at all when he died.
description of Jinnah-Karna. Jinnah lacked inherited status and the position he gained in politics and law rested upon his own efforts. During the early part of his career he seems to have been weighed down by a sense of failure and low self-esteem. The essay mentions that Lord Mountbatten saw him as a person with chronic megalomania. Prof. Saeed sees a congruence between his personal ambition and the aspirations of the Muslims. Jinnah knew how to exploit this for he seemed to promise them the political power that the Quran had promised them and which was wielded by their forbears in India (Philips and Wainright ed. 1970:276-293). In Tharoor's novel, Mohammed Ali Karna is a flourishing lawyer in Bombay but no one is sure about his origins and the young man does nothing to dispel the myths that grow around him. He is a good orator and it is as a skilled advocate that Karna approaches politics. His speech at the Working Committee has an electrifying effect. "We cannot hope to rule ourselves by leading mobs of people who are ignorant of the desideratum of self-rule. Populism and demagoguery do not move parliament my friends. Breaking the law will not help us to make the law one day..." (138). The power of Jinnah's speeches was well known.

In the epic, when Karna is demonstrating his prowess in front of the royal gathering, his father who is a charioteer bursts in and his antecedents are established, and Karna feels humiliated. In Tharoor's story, a durwan bursts in to say that a man in driver's uniform wanted to see Ali Karna urgently and he claimed to be his father Dhritarashtra merely says, "A driver's son has been lecturing to us on the unsuitability of the masses." While this establishes a parallel, it also deviates from the epic in an
important way. While in the epic, Karna and Duryodhana become good friends, and Dhritarashtra supports the friendship, in Tharoor's novel there is antagonism and rivalry between Dhritarashtra and Karna. The compulsions of historical fact dictate this. Tharoor is able to include many historical details regarding the rise of Jinnah and the role of the Muslim League in Book Seven, titled 'The Son also Rises'. Using pun, Tharoor draws attention to the fact that Karna in the epic was considered to be the son of the Sun God.

Another detail from the Mahabharata that Tharoor incorporates is the manner of Karna's death. In the fierce battle with Arjun, Karna's chariot wheel sank in the mud and forced him to alight to extricate it. Arjun's arrow severed his head. Tharoor adapts this for modern conditions to produce humour and irony. The creator of Karnistan is in a rage when the tyre of his car is punctured and when trying to extricate it, he collapses, but not before shaking his fist at the sun. Ingenious adaptations of myth such as this helps to maintain the continuity in the mythological background. The narrative strategy makes two processes work simultaneously. While he is fictionalizing history he is mythicizing it. When he deviates from the myth, thereby fictionalizing it, he is historicizing it.

The most important deviation from the original myth is the relationship between Karna and Duryodhana. In the novel, Priya Duryodhani represents Indira Gandhi, and Jinnah had died long before she became Prime Minister. Tharoor is forced to ignore the relationship of friendship in the original. However, he takes advantage of another tale in the
*Mahabharata* while telling us the story of the Hacked-off Land of Karnistan. This is the story of Jarasandha.

More than once, Tharoor uses the narrative device of the dream to include mythological details. After telling us the story of Jarasandha in this manner, he links the episode to the splitting of Pakistan into two countries after the Bangla Desh war. We are told in the epic that the King of Magadha married the twin daughters of the King of Kasi and vowed not to show any partiality to either. When the two women gave birth to half a child each, they were horrified and cast away the pieces, but when the complimentary halves came into contact, they united to become whole. He in time, became a powerful tyrant and had succeeded in imprisoning eighty-six princes and had plans to immolate a hundred. This tyrant is killed by Bhima, who is instructed by Krishna to tear him asunder and throw the pieces in opposite directions.

In the historical context Jarasandha Khan (Ayub Khan), the military dictator of Karnistan for two decades, calls for elections. Little does he realize that the other half of Karnistan, Gelabi Desh would send in more representatives to Parliament. Its one great problem, overpopulation, is now a political asset. Jarasandha Khan promptly arrests the leaders of the Gelabin People's Party and declares the election null and void. At this juncture, Priya Duryodhani is suddenly perceived as Ma Duryodhani, Shakthi or Mother Goddess who has come to save the victims from the tyrant Jarasandha. With the help of the mighty Bhim, the Hacked-off Land is really hacked in two. Here again, some inconsistencies are unavoidable. Arjun the
spy, Krishna the thinker, and Bhim the soldier helped Duryodhani, we are told. The purpose served by the slaying of Jarasandha in the *Mahabharata* was to enable Yudhishtir to perform the Rajasuya sacrifice, which would make him the emperor. The purpose served here is to make Duryodhani a goddess like figure. The introduction of the reference to Shakthi serves two purposes. It suggests the mythological tales of the Mother Goddess like Durga who killed the demon to protect her devotees. It serves the second purpose in showing how the popular imagination deifies a popular politician or how the politician often arrogates to himself or herself such divine attributes. In recent politics, the chief minister of Tamil Nadu was depicted as the goddess Cauveryamman.

This brings us to the depiction of the Pandavas. Here, Tharoor adopts the technique of giving multiple identities to the characters to suit the historical or mythological context. Pandu cannot father children and willingly becomes the “absentee landlord of his wife’s womb”(87). The narrator Vyasa tells us about the surrogate fathers of Pandu’s five sons which helps us to identify their symbolic status in the novel. Yudhishtir is the judiciary, Bhim the army, Arjun the ideal citizen at first, also becomes the symbol for the fourth estate. Nakul and Sahadev represent the two arms of the bureaucracy, the Indian Administrative Service and the Indian Foreign Service. The *swayamvara* or the competition for the hand of Draupadi is linked to the elections and it is not a political party that wins, but the Pandavas (313). They are the husbands and protectors of Draupadi Mokrasi or democracy. If the institutions that they represent are weak or
corrupt, democracy is in danger. Later however, Yudhishtir is seen as the Deputy Prime Minister and the details of characterization point to Morarji Desai. Arjun is sometimes the intellectual, the typical Indian or even the spy as in the Gelabi Desh War. The swayamvara of Draupadi is described as a dream or vision. The line of suitors walk up to a large wooden box with a slit in the middle and drop slips of paper into it. Draupadi is made to sit inside it, and the lid clicks shut. The suitors had to try and open the box “In the mists of my dream, Ganapathi, a long line of contenders walked forward to claim the hand of Draupadi. There were rich men, men of title, commoners, kings. There were others from my dream: Heaslop in suit and bowler hat, clutching textbooks and commercial contracts; a strange, ugly American in a flowered shirt and Bermuda shorts, with a camera around his neck . . . None of them could open the box” (313). A figure from the past also emerged, Mohammed Ali Karna but Vyasa turned him away. Tharoor delights in the humour of incongruity and irony. At the same time, the list makes us think about the options open for India at the time and the policy decisions she had to make. Another example of humour arising from the incongruous mix of myth and politics would be his comment on the birth of Yudhishtir. Pandu claims he was in a state of meditation, and that he heard a voice saying that his son would be renowned for his virtue and truthfulness. But Vyasa/Tharoor says, “But I have always suspected that Pandu had simply been reading a biography of George Washington too late into the night and dreamt the whole thing” (86).
Other details from the epic that are worked into the novel are Arjun's exploits in South India, his marriage to Subhadra (after an entertaining chase in an Ambassador car), Bhim's marriage to Hidamba and the birth of Ghatotkach. The birth of a son so preoccupies Bhim that he ignores the challenge of Bakasura, here depicted as a wrestling champion who had defeated the contenders from Ekachakra. One must note that the Indian flag has one chakra or wheel in the centre. A diffident Sahadev is sent to tackle him and he gets soundly thrashed. This is introduced in the context of the Chinese invasion, Bakasura representing China, and the complete failure of India's foreign policy and defence preparedness is lampooned.

The 'transformation' of Pandu is another narrative device that helps Tharoor to introduce shifts in identity. In parts of the narrative, Pandu retains his mythological role. His sojourn in the forest is used opportunely to make him into an ascetic minded leader who is more like Sardar Patel or Tilak. He seems to undergo yet another transformation in identity to become a militant leader like Bose who tries to win support from the Japanese and the Germans. History tells us that Shyam Sundar Chakravathi was deported for such activities (Gupta 1970:67). The shifts in identity are often accompanied by shifts in style or a shift from prose to verse, though the verse sometimes is more like a series of limericks. This of course is in keeping with the mock-epic tone used throughout.

Another character from the epic who undergoes shifts in identity to fit the historical context is Drona. He was the preceptor of the Kuru princes, the Pandavas included. Arjun was his favourite pupil. Although Drona and
Drupada were fellow students, the latter humiliated him when he became king, by refusing to help him and even rejecting the former friendship. In order to take revenge, he sent Arjun to defeat him and take him prisoner. Drupada, humiliated thus, was allowed to return to his kingdom, but Drona claimed half his kingdom. Now, in the novel if Drewpad is the British Viceroy, then the loss of the Indian colony fits in. Soon after Independence, Drona becomes the Minister of State for Administrative reforms. Vyasa the narrator, becomes expansive at this juncture, and says that in spite of the death and destruction that accompanied partition, there was the exhilaration of change. Englishmen who edited newspapers were suddenly discovering the virtues of nationalist leaders and “pink-skinned civil servants with worthless life-time contracts” were learning to be obsequious to Indians. One of them was Ronald Heaslop, who was trying to obtain compensation for loss of property during the partition riots. The interview with the Minister is an entertaining example of appropriation in post colonial literature. In the Drona-Heaslop episode, the latter now takes on the role of Drewpad of the epic. The two had earlier met in Devi Hill where Drona had spoken to Heaslop about Indian spiritualism, and when later, Drona had approached him for some help, Heaslop had treated him like a beggar. Now as Minister, he adopts his most swadeshi accent and remarks to a red faced Heaslop, “Amazing what adversity can do for the memory cells.” Drona examines his papers with exaggerated care and the interview soon turns into a cross-examination and Heaslop says that he lost his property in a major riot. And what was he doing at the time? He was asleep. “And you were asleep? A major riot between two sections of His Majesty’s subjects in your district, and
you, Mr. Heaslop, were sleeping? You surprise me, Shri Heaslop. I would have seen you instead in your official jeep, restoring law and order and sanity to the population. That would have been your 'service-related function', would it not?" (241). A verbal drubbing follows and the Minister suggests that a collection be made for poor Mr. Heaslop and he himself would make the first contribution. He draws out a fistful of coins from the folds of his garment and slowly pours them, "in a tinkling cascade" into Mr. Heaslop's lap. It is only when Heaslop splutters an apology that Drona becomes receptive to his request, and agrees to give Mr. Heaslop a transfer to Delhi and once again, Heaslop reddens with embarrassment and gratitude. "Heaslop rose, stretched out his hand, and found the minister's palms folded in a polite but correct namaste. Clumsily, he retracted his own and mirrored the gesture" (243). Tharoor uses the Drona-Drupada episode with elan. This is an excellent example of the way in which he combines myth, humour and satire, giving it a historical value at the same time. Such an anti-imperialist section, where the Englishman is laughed at, would not have been published either in India or London a few decades ago. Time has given us the objectivity to laugh at such things without rancour. The whole episode can also be read as a parody of E.M. Foster's Passage to India where Heaslop is the superior imperialist. Describing the natives, Heaslop says, "They used to cringe, but the younger generation believe in a show of manly independence. They think it will pay better with the itinerant M.P. But whether the native swaggers or cringes, there's always something behind every remark he makes, always something, and if nothing else he's trying to increase his
izzo--in plain Anglo-Saxon, to score” (p. 1947:31). Here, Drona has indeed scored over Heaslop.

The name Jaiprakash Drona links the character to Jaiprakash Narayan of the Sarvodaya Movement, and at times the characterization reminds us of his mentor, Vinoba Bhave. The well respected Sarvodaya leader was popular among the peasants and the poor, and in time this popularity proved to be an embarrassment to Nehru/Dhritarashtra and his daughter Priya Duryodhani. Jaiprakash Drona has the Pandavas as his followers when they are in exile and they undertake to work for rural upliftment. The hostility between Nehru/ Dhritarashtra and Drona is not true to the mythological story, but Tharoor has to distort and adapt for the sake of accuracy in history. There is another important distortion when Drona calls for a popular uprising against Duryodhani. In the epic, Drona, inspite of his affection for the Pandavas, fights as a general in Duryodhana’s army. In the novel, Ashwathaman, Drona’s son, is in Duryodana’s camp. Fearing a complication, Yudhishtir asks Sahadava to tell Drona that the plane carrying Ashwathaman has crashed. When Vyasa upbraids Yudhishtir for telling a lie, he says that the previous night, he had taken a cockroach from the closet, named it Ashwathaman and crushed it under the prime-ministerial despatch-box! (410). Tharoor, quite deliberately it seems, resorts to bathos, which is in keeping with the mock-epic spirit of the novel. In the original myth, when the Pandavas are unable to trounce Drona in battle, Yudhishtir confirms in front of Drona, that Ashwathaman is dead. Yudhishtir, who
never lies, explains that he meant that an elephant used in the battle, called Ashwathaman was dead.

The identification of Drona with Jaiprakash Narayan helps Tharoor to fit in the lac house episode, but there is an inconsistency when he tries to include the Ekalavya story. Jaiprakash Narayan worked for the uplift of the rural poor, and to make him dismiss a poor school boy who wanted education is not in keeping with his character. In the epic, Ekalavya becomes an expert archer by observing Drona teach the Pandavas, especially Arjun. Not belonging to the Kshatriya caste, he had not dared to approach Drona as a pupil. When Drona comes to know how he had acquired his knowledge, he demands the customary guru dakshina or fee. He asks for the boy’s right thumb, thus making sure that he will never wield a bow. In the novel, Ekalavya is the son of a maid servant who had tied for the first place with Arjun in the school exam. He had eavesdropped on Drona’s lessons. Drona calls him a “free loader” and demands the fee, his right thumb as in the epic. The boy is nonplused at first, but then stands his ground and refuses to pay. In a fit of anger, Drona dismisses the boy. Yudhishtir is uneasy, and asks Drona if he would have really severed the thumb if the boy had agreed. Drona deflects the question. Tharoor gets by with this ambiguity. The conclusion of the episode is distorted, but it throws light on the changing social conditions in Indian society, where the lower castes, with better opportunities for education, are learning to assert their rights.

The effect of using parody and the irreverent tone is that Tharoor succeeds in destroying the myths that surround political leaders, especially
Nehru and Indira Gandhi. It can be said that he deconstructs the political myth that surrounds them. Indira Gandhi/Priya Duryodhani is denounced unsparingly, both through the use of myth and humour. She becomes the arch enemy of the Pandavas and Draupadi for it was during her regime that all the democratic institutions were undermined. Politics was criminalised to a degree greater than ever before. While Rushdie makes her the vicious Widow in *Midnight’s Children*, Tharoor identifies her with the villain of the *Mahabharata*, and this will have an instant appeal for the Indian reader, for in the Indian imagination, Duryodhana is the symbol of evil. Her declaration of Emergency is a serious threat to democracy Tharoor makes use of such a context to include episodes from the *Mahabharata* such as the attempted murder of Bhim, the Lac House episode and the story of Jarasandha. Tharoor shows great ingenuity in adapting these myths to the historical situation. In particular, the way he infuses the Lac House episode with humour is noteworthy. The atrocities of the Emergency are likened to the forest fire in the epic. The Emergency had empowered Priya Duryodhani “to prohibit, proscribe, profane, prosecute and prostitute all the freedoms (of) the national movement”(357). Shakuni Shanker Dey is Duryodhani’s adviser and he initiates the game of dice, as in the epic. Uncle Shakuni is the evil genius behind Duryodhana. Here, Yudhishtir wagers the Constitution, the laws, the peace of the people. He wagers his own freedom together with that of his party workers. He stakes his brothers and finally Draupadi too is lost. In effect, all the democratic institutions have been lost or subverted. At times
the chronology of the epic cannot be maintained. Many times Tharoor has to resort to the technique of dream narration to link the myth with history.

At the height of her tyranny, Duryodhani surprises everyone by calling for elections. The voice of the people is now represented by Arjun. The long discussions between Arjun and Vyasa show that it is a time of reassessment. Krishna's role is important. The enigmatic Krishna in the novel seems to merge personalities and concepts in himself. He is said to be the son of a freedom fighter and prefers local politics to national acclaim. He is the secretary of the Gokarna Peoples Party and resides in Dwarakaveetii. His full name is Krishnakutty Parthasarathy Menon. Gokarna and Dwaraka are places associated with Krishna. Krishnakutty simply means baby Krishna, as he is loved everywhere in India. He can be called Parthasarathy because it means a charioteer, and he served as Arjun's charioteer in the war. The Menon in the name associates him with Kerala, where Krishna is loved, especially in the temple at Guruvayur.

The election campaign becomes the battleground, the Kurukshetra of the novel. Krishna's exhortation (in verse) to Arjun who is undecided how to act, mixes the high philosophy of the Bhagavad Gita with the strategies of electioneering. The need of the hour is the electoral pact. History is mixed with humour and myth with a skill that only Tharoor is capable of. Duryodhani is trounced in the election but though the people spontaneously dance the bhangra, Vyasa is demoralized. "Something had passed whose shadow would always remain, and something had begun that would not endure. For it is my fate Ganapathi, to have to record not a climactic triumph
but a moment of bathos. The Indian people gave themselves the privilege of replacing a determined collected tyrant with an indeterminate collection of tyros" (402).

Both history and myth are reinterpreted and reassessed in the election episode. When an enthusiastic young journalist approaches Vyasa and says that the election is like the Kurukshetra battle, the battle between good and evil, Vyasa erupted, “I hope not, because there were no victors at Kurukshetra. The story of the Mahabharata young man, does not end on the field of battle... There was good and bad, dishonour and treachery, betrayal and death on both sides. There was no glorious victory at Kurukshetra.” The journalist is totally bewildered for all that tradition had taught him about the battle being a Dharmakshetra, the fight of good against evil, was being called into question. Vyasa who was in a stern mood relented, and explained, “Young man, you must understand one thing. This election is not Kurukshetra; life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra, The struggle between dharma and adharma is the struggle our nation, and each of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence. That struggle, that battle, took place before this election; it will continue after it” (391).

Vyasa/Tharoor indulges in a “little sociological lecture” like this every now and then, and once asks Ganapathi to “wipe that the-old-man’s-digressing-again look off your face.” On this occasion, Tharoor/Vyasa is talking about the multicultural aspect of Indian society. Even the Muslims are not a monolithic bloc. There were the Sunnis and Shias, Moplahs and Bohras, Khojas and Ismailis, Qadianis and Ahmediyas and so on and they
lived among the Brahmins and Thakurs, Nairs and Lingayats, Marwaris and Christians, and the Christians themselves could be divided into Syrian and Catholic, Anglican and Protestant and so on. Differences are a fact of Indian life and in such an over-peopled land like India, labeling people gives them a definite identity and one is not lost in the general morass. “Mutual exclusion does not necessarily mean hostility.” If this truth is properly understood, then caste wars, communal discord and ethnic strife wherever it occurs may be mitigated.

That history can never claim to be a complete or truthful representation of events is what all the novelists studied here try to demonstrate. For Vyasa, the truth that he understands is that he is the chronicler and participant in the events he describes. “It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji’s truth, and the fight to be rid of British and Hindu was Karna’s truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities? Question, Ganapathi. Is it permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun? Questions Two and Three. At what point in the recollection of truth does wisdom cease to transcend knowledge? How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy?” (164). Tharoor reinforces this in his conclusion. Rushdie too, makes this the central point in Midnight’s Children.

Tharoor concludes his novel by telling Ganapathi that he has told his tale from a completely mistaken perspective. He has no choice but to retell the tale. This is most effective for his purpose for what he wants to
communicate is that there can be more than one perspective of history, and there can be any number of interpretations of myth and fiction alike. It is a vindication of the reader response theories. Unlike ihimaera who wants to present the Maori perspective of history, Tharoor’s intention is not to present an Indian version of history, but a fictionalized history that deconstructs concepts and personalities and provokes analysis.

The fictionalizing-mythicizing process gives Tharoor opportunities for interpretative digressions—one of the techniques inherent in the Indian epic. A few examples will show that Tharoor/Vyasa can mix wisdom with humour and at the same time interpret both history and myth. At the beginning of Section 73 he says, “History, Ganapathi—indeed the world, the universe, all human life, and so, too, every institution under which we live—is in a constant state of evolution. The world and everything in it is being created and re-created even as I speak, each hour, each day, each week, going through the unending process of birth and rebirth which has made us all. India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again. India is forever; and India is forever being made”(245).

What Vyasa puts forth is a philosophy of history though he earlier claims that he is no philosopher. This same philosophic outlook is seen in the complete distortion of the final episode in the life of Yudhishtir. Again depicted as the dream of Vyasa, we see Yudhishtir on his journey to the Himalayas, in this case accompanied by Krishna himself. Krishna is the first to fall, from a deep wound in his heel. In the myth, Krishna does not accompany Yudhishtir on his last journey and he dies much later when a
hunter shoots an arrow through his heel when he is asleep. The comment that Tharoor makes at this point is that Krishna could have prevented the catastrophe but he chose not to do so. "India has too many Krishnas. His brilliance burnt itself out without illuminating the country." Here, Krishna represents the thinkers and intellectuals who fail to act to shape the destiny of the country. As Yudhishtir and his brothers journey up the Himalayas, we see them fall one by one. This happens in the epic too. A voice proclaims the reason for their fall and we see how each one has failed to protect Draupadi (democracy) and perform his duty. Finally, Time or Kaalam accosts Yudhishtir and as in the myth he has to face many tests and trials. The dog is his only companion and he refuses to enter heaven without it for it has followed him faithfully to the end. Pleased at this, the god Dharma reveals himself and takes him in. When he sees Priya Duryodhani seated on a golden throne he is aghast and Dharma explains, "History's judgements are not easily made, my son. To some, Duryodhani is a revered figure, a saviour of India, a Joan of Arc burned at the democratic stake by the ignorant and the prejudiced. Abandon your old bitterness here, Yudhishtir. There are no enmities in History's court" (416). When the appalled Yudhishtir asks to be taken to his brothers, he is made to journey through what seems like hell, the air filled with the noxious stench of rotting vegetation and smouldering pyres, the ear assailed by the wails of suffering people which at times seemed like the voices of his brothers. When Yudhishtir says he prefers to stay where his brothers are, the vision is transformed and he is in a assembly of resplendent personages. Thus far, Tharoor follows the original myth closely. But now in the assembly we see not only Draupadi and Bhim, but Drewpad,
the Karnistanis and the Kauravas, blind Dhritarashtra and the blind Georgina and all of them are clapping! When Yudhishtir wants to know the meaning of the scene, Dharma replies, "Everyone, finds his place in history, even those who have failed to observe dharma. But it is essential to recognize virtue and righteousness and to praise him who, like yourself, has consistently upheld dharma." Yudhishtir is furious and says that his righteousness has not helped him, his family or his country and wonders if justice prevails in his country or in history. Like a modern philosopher historian, he continues to say that though India is eternal there seems to be no eternal dharma, and at every stage of its evolution an appropriate value system must evolve. He feels defeated, humiliated and irrelevant. For too many generations, Indians have believed that India had all the answers. Now he wonders if we even know the relevant questions. At this, Dharma slowly changes back into a dog. Yudhishtir desperately tries to communicate his last thoughts. "No more certitudes. Accept doubt and diversity. Let each man live by his own code of conduct, so long as he has one. Derive your standards from the world around you . . . Admit there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one dharma . . ." (418)

In this provocative final assessment we have a lot to ruminate about. It seems natural to accept that change is inevitable, and the people of this modern world do believe in what Yudhishtir has said, and the reader may feel that at the end Tharoor might have spared the reader this little sermon. But when Vyasa says that he has suddenly realized that he has told the story from the wrong perspective and he must needs retell the tale, we are forced
to re-examine the attitudes and perspectives we agreed with all along. Through this final distortion, Tharoor makes us take a second look at both myth and Indian history. The epic concludes quite differently. After his test in hell, Yudhishtir is reunited with his family and all of them live in peace together with Dhritarashtra, Duryodhana and others. There is no enmity, for if one has attained the state of the gods, there must only be peace and serenity, no enmity or anger. The final lesson in the epic is that of love and peace, but while reading the novel we seem to spontaneously agree with Yudhishtir. Are we right? Are there eternal verities? The reader must decide.

The novel can be considered as a post-colonial, anti-imperialist enterprise in some respects. It is not just an example of the empire writing back but ‘talking back’. This phrase is appropriate for more than one reason. Firstly, the novel can be considered a ‘speech act’ for it is Vyasa’s dictation and he sometimes talks to his scribe Ganapathi. This enables Tharoor to use a variety of the nuances of tone that the English language is capable of, especially in the sections dealing with Drewpad, The Resident and Heaslop. The portrayal of these characters is more in the nature of satirical caricature or verbal cartoon. The resulting humour, shows an Indian author, laughing at the imperialist, though not without good humour. For example, the scene where the Viceroy invites Gangaji to tea is delectable. Much to everyone’s surprise Gangaji accepts the invitation and enters the living room of the Viceroyal palace swaddled in homespun. Sir Richard ushers him in without a hint of welcome and finds it more convenient not to offer a seat to Sarah-behn. Of course, Gangaji is made to wait and in the silence the clock ticks
loudly. The ensuing conversation shows how Gangaji uses the English language to make Sir Richard acutely uncomfortable:

"I hope I have not come too early," Gangaji said at last.

"No, not at all," Sir Richard found himself forced to reply "His Excellency has . . . er . . . been unavoidably detained."

"Unavoidably detained," Gangaji repeated "Unavoidably detained."

He savoured the words, seeming to taste each syllable as he uttered it.

"Another one of your fine British phrases, suitable for so many occasions, is it not? I wish I knew some of these myself. I always listen carefully to my English friends, like His Excellency or indeed you, Sir Richard" -- Sir Richard coughed unaccountably . . . (128).

A very embarrassed Sir Richard can only mumble that he hopes Gangaji is not unduly inconvenienced. As quick as ever, Gangaji says that he is not inconvenienced at all since he is sitting in a room large enough to accommodate a small train, but as for Sarah-bhen, she may have a different reply. Sir Richard, tactfully faulted on his bad manners, has to offer her a chair, and the initial intention of insult is reversed. It is the exact use of tone that creates so much discomfort for Sir Richard and so much amusement for the reader. The combination of Gangaji, Sir Richard and Heaslop seems to inspire spontaneous mirth.

While Tharoor revels in verbal and situational humour, his more serious purpose is to overturn the historically accepted attitudes that are seen in the imperialist version of history as well as in the fiction of the white authors.
The superiority that is almost a right is called in question or simply inverted. It is like the African writers' attempt to break out of the stereotyping imposed by the white races. Some writers have made fun of the Indian trying to dress and speak like the British. Tharoor reverses this and the laugh is raised at the expense of the British. The conversation between Sir Richard and Heaslop unfailingly does this. Sir Richard tries to understand the political tactics of Gangaji, and can only see them as the strange antics of a rabble rouser. Yet Gangaji succeeds in appealing to all manner of people. He knew the rules of the game and therefore undermined it. "... he stands before them in his bedsheet, revelling in their adulation," says Sir Richard, greatly chagrined. While Heaslop maintained a discreet silence, Sir Richard fumes at the man's audacity to come to the Planter's Club in the same attire and is outraged to read the newspaper account of what Gangaji said when he was rebuked by the President of the Planter's Club:

"Sir Richard rummaged in his pockets and pulled out a newspaper clipping. "Mine is a dress," he quoted in mounting indignation, "which is best suited to the Indian climate and which, for all its simplicity, art and cheapness, is not to be beaten on the face of the earth. Above all, it meets hygienic requirements far better than European attire. Had it not been for a false pride and equally false notions of prestige, Englishmen here would long ago have adopted the Indian costume." I ask you! Your precious Mr. Ganga Datta would have the Viceroy in a loincloth, Heaslop. What on earth is that sound you are making?" (61).
Equally humorous is the discussion about Hindustani. In trying to say ‘darwaza khol dey’ and ‘darwaza bhand karo’ Sir Richard manages to say “that was a cold day” and “there was a banned crow” and admits that he is confused as to which one to use to ask for the door to be opened. He orders two whiskies speaking Hindustani with great confidence and satisfaction. “Two whiskies, do whisky, boy. And a big jug of water, understand. Not a little lota eh? Bring it in a bhisti. Bhisti men la.” Anyone who knows the meaning of ‘lota’ and ‘bhisti’ would understand the gaffe he was making. Sir Richard is apoplectic when a grimy loin-cloth clad water carrier entered the room bringing water in a black oil skin bag that dripped water all over the floor! (37,39). Tharoor’s talent must be appreciated, for this can be seen as a parody of the Uthanga episode in the Mahabharata. The brahmin Uthanga, a devotee of Krishna, has to learn to give up all caste prejudices, for he does not want to drink water given by an untouchable. Here, the superior British do not understand the language and have contempt for the poorest of the poor.

The British would have one believe that the partition of India was a historical necessity, and they did all that was possible to make it fair. Tharoor is devastating in his humour when it comes to the demarcation of territories during the partition. It was accomplished by the simple act of wielding a pencil on a small scale map!

“Congratulations, Mr. Nicholas!” A veteran administrator named Basham rose to his feet. “I have lived and worked in that very district for the last ten years, and I must take my hat off to you. You have just
succeeded in putting your international border through the middle of
the market, giving the rice fields to Karnistan and the warehouses to
India, the largest pig-farm in the zilla to the Islamic state and the
Madrassah of the Holy Prophet to the country the Muslims are
leaving. Oh, if I understand that squiggle there correctly," he added,
taking the pointer from the open-mouthed expert, "the school master
will require a passport to go to the loo between classes. Well done, Mr.
Nicholas. I hope the rest of the work proves as . . . (ear l224-225)

It is extremely difficult to render the emotion charged subject, so full of pain,
blood and anguish, with humour. "In those days, Ganapathi, lines meant
lives" says Vyasa, but he categorically rejects the theories of 'hind-sight
historians' who say that our leaders agreed to partition in too great haste and
that Karna was the most surprised man when it happened. Vyasa says that
we had no other choice because of Karna's inhuman obduracy and Drewpad's
indecent haste. Tharoor is sharp in his criticism of the British policy of divide
and rule and highlights their hypocrisy when General Dyer (Colonel Rudyard
in the novel) is given a hero's farewell and a good pension. All this is not to
say that Tharoor/Vyasa has not provoked a laugh at the expense of the
Indian character. There is ribald humour when we read of Pandu and his
wives, grim humour in the depiction of Priya Duryodhani, good-natured
laughter at the expense of Gangaji and Arjun. Vyasa does laugh at himself
on occasion, sometimes through sheer incongruity. Once he uses a metaphor
from cricket to illustrate a fine philosophic point. Tharoor's dexterity in
manipulating tone makes his satire incisive and his humour double-edged.
No Indian has used the English language with such a flourish to unsettle the English.

Tharoor’s imaginative rendering of myth and history raises the question of graphonomy. Bill Ashcroft in his essay titled ‘Constitutive Graphonomy’ asks the question, can a reader fully understand a different cultural reality being communicated in a text? Meaning is created within the discourse of a culture which is dependent on social facts and social structure. There are three participants in the process -- the language, the utterer or writer, and the hearer or reader -- and they have always contested for the ownership of meaning. The central feature of this transaction is the presence of the speaker and the hearer to each other. In a cross cultural text the distance between the author and the reader is immense, constituting what can be called an “absence”, “a gulf of silence” or “a metonymic gap”. This is a definite difficulty if the text uses accepted units or tropes of cultural meaning to a large extent. That is, the writer can assume that a name, a word, situation has a particular resonance in a particular culture, which of course, may not be the case with the reader from another culture. “Constitutive graphonomy” is the “constitutive ethnography” of writing systems. Such elements need to be isolated and explained to the cross cultural reader. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1995: 288-289). This operates almost throughout Tharoor’s novel, for meaning, interpretation and humour depend to a great extent on such a cultural discourse. For example, the very names Bhishma, Yudhishtir, Duryodhana and Shakuni are loaded with cultural resonances. An added difficulty is the inter-textuality between the novel and the Mahabharata, for,
understanding the distortions, deviations, subversions and parody depends on a knowledge of the epic. A third difficulty is that the text demands a knowledge of Indian history. Yet another factor is the use of the nuances of tone in the English language. These multiple differences often contribute to the multiple levels of meaning.

Barthes's technique of semiotic analysis might help to identify the way in which these interlocking systems work. As seen in the first chapter, myth, according to Barthes is a type of speech that works on what language has already created to produce a second order of meaning: that is, a second order language system that makes use of the first which Barthes calls 'language object'. A myth system is therefore metalanguage.

Barthes studies myth as a "semiological schema" and finds the typical tri-dimensional pattern: the signifier, the signified and the sign. What is peculiar to myth is that the sum of the signs or the final term in the semiological chain becomes the mere signifier (or starting point) in the second. The signifier of myth is simultaneously both meaning and form. The meaning which comprises knowledge of a past, a memory or an order of facts, ideas or decisions, is already complete. (This is in fact what Ashcroft would call cultural discourse.) When we focus on meaning as form (second level), the meaning recedes or is impoverished, since the myth draws nourishment from the "reserve of history." The form is rooted in meaning and yet there is a "constant game of hide and seek between the meaning and form which defines myth." (Sontag ed. 104)
It is this game of hide and seek that novelists consciously or unconsciously exploit as narrative technique, especially in a novel that makes significant use of myth. The myth in its original form would be the first order of signs. The author’s manipulation of this, by means of fictionalizing, distorting or recreating it with parallels, or parodies of the original, would result in the second order of meaning. It is both metalanguage and metafiction. When reading Tharoor, the reader is positioned at the meaning-form junction and moves backwards and forwards—backwards to the original myth and forward to the new signification. Barthes says, “myth plays on the analogy between meaning and form, there is no myth without motivated form” (Sontag ed. 1993:113). In language the sign is arbitrary. Barthes gives the example of the acoustic image tree which need not be linked to the concept tree. The sign here is unmotivated. Mythical signification, on the other hand, is never arbitrary, “it is always in part motivated and unavoidably contains some analogy” (112). Barthes goes on to explain that it is history that supplies its analogies to the form. The analogy is always partial, for it drops many features and retains only a few.

The final step in this three part process is signification. This can be described as the total of correlations or the sum of interactions between the mythical concept and the mythical form. Though Barthes uses the words ‘total’ and ‘sum’ he says it is not the aggregate but the oscillating process by which meaning is finally derived. It is therefore, according to Barthes, “a relation of deformation” (108). That is, the concept is constantly distorting or alienating the meaning of the first order, the sign. The reader has to go
through a process which is like a moving turnstile which alternately presents the meaning of the signifier in the first order and then constitutes the first stage in the second order. "Signification of the myth is constituted by a sort of constantly moving turnstile which presents alternately the meaning of the signifier and its form, a language object and a metalanguage, a purely signifying and a purely imagining consciousness. This alternation is, so to speak, gathered up in the concept, which uses it like an ambiguous signifier, at once intellective and imaginary, arbitrary and natural." (109) This analogy of Barthes is very apt and one could coin the term 'turnstile effect' to name the narrative strategy of writers who exploit this process of meaning creation.

First we can consider the process in Barthes's own example and then adapt it to read a passage from Tharoor's novel. Since any kind of communication can be considered a speech act, Barthes includes pictures, photographs, cinema and other such forms as an example. Barthes considers the picture of a Negro soldier saluteing the French flag, with his eyes uplifted and fixed on the tricolour. The meaning of the picture is that a negro soldier in a French military uniform is saluting the French flag accepting French sovereignty. This is the first chain of meaning which becomes the signifier for the second chain. The second order meaning feeds on this first chain and produces a signification that would tell us that France is a great Empire and that all her sons, without any colour discrimination serve her faithfully and this refutes the charge of colonial detractors who look on France as the
oppressor. Having arrived at this second order signification we go back to the first order and read the signifier anew. This is the 'turnstile effect'.

Now, let us examine how it works in fiction, taking a passage from *The Great Indian Novel*, episode eighteen that closes Book III. The context is that Gandhari has just delivered a girl child and has failed to create a male heir for her husband Dhritarashtra. The astrologer had foretold she would be the mother of a hundred sons. Vyasa visits her, and says.

"Your daughter Gandhari," I said taking her hand in mine, "will be equal to a thousand sons. This I promise you."

I could not see into those closed eyes; I knew she did not believe me. Nor would she have believed what destiny had in store for her painfully wrought child. Gandhari would not live to know it, but her sombre-eyed daughter, Priya Duryodhani, would grow up one day to rule India.(74)

The first chain of meaning would be: Vyasa speaks reassuringly to Gandhari who seems both exhausted and disappointed after the birth of her daughter, by telling her that her daughter will be equal to a thousand sons. The promise sounds more like a prophecy. Though Gandhari does not know or believe, Vyasa's declaration that she will rule India is made with conviction. The daughter's name is Priya Duryodhani.

As this becomes the 'form' or the first unit of the second chain of meaning, it has to draw from a "reserve of history". This would involve knowledge of the original epic, where Duryodhana is the eldest son of
Gandhari, and Dhritarashtra did have a hundred sons and all of them are identified with unrighteousness as the story develops. It also involves knowledge of Indian history, where Nehru and his daughter Indira Gandhi were Prime Ministers of India.

Being part of a continuous narrative, this chain of meaning has to draw on what has been said before. For the convenience of analysis of this small unit of text, we will include that Dhritarashtra is the fictionalized/mythicized name of Nehru and Gandhari is Kamala Nehru. Therefore, the daughter born will represent Indira Gandhi.

The third stage of meaning derivation would therefore be to identify the discrepancies between the text and the original, one daughter instead of a hundred sons, who is equal to a thousand. The final signification would therefore read: The prophecy is more than true and Priya Duryodhani/Indira Gandhi will rule India with greater unrighteousness. We therefore see that the meaning making process in the novel involves a movement back and forth between inter-related tropes of meaning, and there can never be a serial order of meaning.

To take another example, we can consider the passage already quoted where Sir Richard is reading out Gangaji's retort to the President of the Planters Club. The first chain of meaning would only be the discussion of the two aspects of propriety and comfort in the matter of dress. The final signification however has little to do with dress. The sense of superiority of the British (encoded even in matters of dress and conduct) has been punctured by an Indian, wearing a 'bedsheet'. The supposed inferiority of the
Indian is also inverted when the Indian dress is seen as something more sensible and comfortable.

Throughout the novel, we have to move two steps back, to the epic and to Indian history, correlate the two to arrive at meaning. If there are implied meanings, we have to even go to a the fourth stage. It could be represented diagramatically as follows:

\[ T_1, T_2, \text{ and } T_3 \text{ represent the turnstile effect, within the larger turnstile.} \]
What remains to be seen is the relevance and significance of Tharoor’s method of yoking history and myth, fictionalizing both. Tharoor himself answers this question in his article ‘The Relevance of the Mahabharata in Today’s India.’ He agrees with the scholars like Sukthankar and Dandekar that there is a timeless quality about the epic. Like all great epics, says Tharoor, it has the capacity to be all things to all men. It has many themes: the vanity of ambition and the futility of anger and hatred, the triumph of good even in destruction, the theme of peace and reconciliation and so on. It is considered the fifth Veda and as Tharoor says, it combines in a unique way the Arthasastra, Dharmasastra, Kamasstra and Mokshastra. That is, it unites the science of political economy and kingship, the ethics of living, the art of love and the knowledge leading to salvation.

Tharoor is of the view that the Mahabharata, unlike the Ramayana, is a secular epic, and all its characters, except Krishna, are not divine. They are men of flesh and blood, capable and culpable. The epic therefore “is an unending source of metaphor for the rhetoric of our own public debate.” A conflict between right and wrong is seen as the battle of Kurukshetra, a principled fighter is Arjun, (our former Election Commissioner Mr. Seshan has often been described in those terms), an intriguer and schemer is a Sakuni. The characters in the Mahabharata have become archetypes. More importantly, the story has structured our way of thinking, has formulated our concept of what is right and wrong, what is acceptable and what is not. It, along with the Ramayana, has created the mind-set of the Indian people.
Yet, in the writing of the novel that creates an explicit analogy between the epic characters and modern politicians, Tharoor acknowledges a handicap and says that at times, his characters are "merely walking metaphors". The tone of irreverence he adopts is a conscious choice, and Tharoor relies on the conviction that irreverence in the Indian tradition is not sacrilege. "My various literary and less-than-literary devices serve an attempt to look at 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 the Mahabharata. The other is the light cast by the satirical view of the present, which by deliberate simplification and fictionalization (one might even say conscious distortion) throws certain trends and issues into sharper relief than history makes possible" (Lal 1992:347).

The novel is not overtly didactic, though sharply satirical in many places. It is Tharoor's comic vision of life that comes through and his sheer pleasure in handling the English language communicates itself to the reader. Yet there is an undertone of seriousness. Tharoor's acknowledged intention was to show that truth always has multiple values. Many truths are at work simultaneously, giving shape and character to India and this multiplicity is caught in the narration. Vyasa the narrator himself has many voices; at times Tharoor uses him as a mouthpiece, at times he is the ancient sage, at times a modern satirist and historian, and at times even a cartoonist.

Tharoor says, "If there is a message to the book, a message I have derived from the Mahabharata, it is two-fold. First, that of the need to re-
examine all received wisdom about India, to question the certitudes, to acknowledge the imperfections and face them; second, to do so through a reassertion of dharma, defined not just as religion but as a whole complex of values and standards, some derived from myth and tradition, some derived from our history -- by which India and Indians must live” (Lal 1992:348)