CHAPTER THREE

THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL
The Great Indian Novel published in 1989, derives its title from the ancient epic, the Mahabharata. Shashi Tharoor has taken the Mahabharata as a blueprint and filled it with a contemporary cast for his witty rendering of pre-independent and post-independent India. The history of India’s struggle against colonial rule and her postcolonial assignation with democracy is presented in an epic vein. Unlike the epic of Vyas, the novel is divided into eighteen books. Its narrative is presented in a multi-coloured style and digressive manner. It seems to take an alternative, specifically new historicist view, of the way modern India should be meditated. The novel indeed has some sterling qualities. The historical narrative follows the line of the Mahabharata to provide insight into current politics and the epic through Indo-nostalgic narration. A literal transplantation of the characters of the epic by actual men and women of history on a one-to-one formula tends on the one hand, to make a caricature of the historical events and on the other hand to ignore the borders between myth and history. In a seminar essay entitled ‘Myth, History and Fiction’ Tharoor (1991:384) states:

The Great Indian Novel is an attempt to retell the political history of twentieth century India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharata.

Further, he (1990:7) calls his novel as “An attempt of yoking of myth to history.” As the novel advances, he gradually abandons the novelistic conventions and the characters become walking metaphors to project Indo-nostalgia. According to P. Lal, (1990:9) it is more of a ‘Mod-Bharata’ in which Tharoor grasps the original epic ‘with both hands and face it squarely.’ In other words, Tharoor has transformed the ancient myth of the Mahabharata by using it as a prop to re-narrate history and politics of modern India in Indo-nostalgic vein. On Tharoor’s fictional attempt, P. Lal (1990:27-28) opines:

To be Indian, or simply to live in India at any period in her recorded history, is to open oneself to the benign moral influence to two epics – the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Caste, creed, colour do not matter here; what matters is the degree, range and subtlety of exposure, which in turns determines the quality of the affected person’s Indianness.

The central story of the novel is of the conflict between two clans of the same family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas over a disputed patrimony. The principal characters of the Mahabharata are conceived as the major institutions of
India. For instance: Bhishma as the army, Arjuna as the press and Draupadi as democracy. Tharoor presents the episodes of disrobing of Draupadi as a parallel to Mrs. Gandhi’s misrule (Dushashan) during the emergency. The marriage of Draupadi and Arjuna has a symbolic implication. The modern Arjuna is a journalist, a representative of the Indian press. “I thought of Arjuna” says Ved Vyas “with his paradoxical mixture of attributes, as the spirit of the Indian people, to whom he so ably gave voice as a journalist.” (p. 320) However, in the process of superimposing the political events of the twentieth century on the basic structure of the *Mahabharata*, Tharoor takes many liberties with the original story and its characters. Kunti of the ancient epic, for instance, has a liberated role to play in this novel. She enjoys “Smoking Turkish cigarettes, wearing her Banarasi Saree, Bombay nails, Bangalore sandals and Barailly bangles which advertised her fabled elegance.” (p.265) The author does not fail to seek parallel for Krishna. His Krishna is a local party secretary, D. Krishna Parthsarthy. As Shri. Aurobindo (1980:284) has hailed the Indian epic as the ‘Fifth Veda.’:

If one looks at the epic as a work of pure fiction, it is still to be surpassed by any modern work of fiction in the sweep of its plot. A reader may get lost in the labyrinth of numerous sub-plots. One of the elements of the old Vedic education was knowledge of significant tradition, *itihasa*, and it is this world that was used by the ancient critics to distinguish the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* from the later literary epics.

The author has shaped them to tell contemporary story and its characters have a great impact on the minds of the people that they have become integral parts of their lives. The caricature of typical Indian stereotypes makes Tharoor to realise his indebted feeling for India and to project them in an Indo-nostalgic mode.

Tharoor’s narrator is eighty-eight years old and with ‘full of irrelevancies’ yet, he is alone witness to the past of the country. He is an acknowledged genesis of all the Hindu cast in the book. According to Michal Pousse (1996:23), “by the time Tharoor started writing his novel, India was torn by a survival of communities in the sub-continent, by including Muslims and Hindus together as a part of a common mythology.” Ved Vyas of Tharoor’s work incarnates the link between history and mythology. Like the Ved Vyas of the original epic, he seeks
help of ‘Ganapathi’ to transcribe ‘The song of modern India in his prose’ He begins the story ‘with the beginning’ stretching it gradually in accordance with the unfolding of the *Mahabharata*. According to Tharoor (1990:5)

The use of narrator, Ved Vyas; who is both a witness to history and a leading participant in it, makes it possible to provide a firsthand relation of events as they really happened and also impart a touch of objectivity and immediacy to the narrative, to project Indo-nostalgia.

He retells the history of the twentieth century; wherein the figure of, Bhishma as Gangaji, (Gandhiji) is recreated. Dhritarashtra becomes Nehru, while Priya Duryodhani, his daughter, stands for Indira Gandhi. It is evident that Nehru’s love for Indira made him blind to many harsh realities of life. In the same way, Subhash Chandra Bose is depicted as Pandu and Muhammad Ali Jinnah as Karna. In other words, the text is born out of a written transcription of an oral narrative to portray Indo-nostalgia. This type of omniscient voice gives way to multiplicity. Tharoor’s narrative like *Ramcharit manasa* of Tulsidas, is a collection of stories told by many people simultaneously. It is a story of India and of its communities, which have linked themselves to the epic traditions in their own way. In the opinion of K. S. Singh (1993:1, 7)

It demonstrates the inherent resilience and dynamism of the civilization process in the country. A remarkable feature of *Mahabharata* from an anthropological angle is that it presents in its present form a grand assembly of all ethnic groups and of the people of all territories constituting the whole of Bharat.

The novel truly encompasses the entire country to celebrate its rich cultural ethos through nostalgic narration. The political history of modern India resembles closely the events and the characters of the *Mahabharata*. The author uses national heritage to foreground the eternal present. Commenting on the fundamental underlining of the novel, Chaudhury M. K. (1994:108) asserts:

It is the continuance of historical process, the pastness of the present and the presentness of the past.

Tharoor is very innovative in his experimentation from the very outset to explore Indo-nostalgia. As the text opens, the modern Ved Vyas is anxious to find a scribe for his story of India. His scribe, Ganapathi, whom he finds after much
deliberation, has “shrewd and intelligent eyes. Through which he is staring owlishly…” (p.18) According to K. Ayyappa Panikar (1990:13) the Vyas-Ganapathi relationship is the most delectable for the present reader. ‘This duality’, he believes:

...is one of the crucial features of the entire work: it makes the ancient tale a very modern one …The Great Indian Novel is in a sense a recreation of the old tale in contemporary terms.

If we analyse the title itself, it is the translation of the words ‘Maha’ (great) and ‘Bharata’ (India). There are many appropriations in the book. Incidentally, the original book has eighteen chapters and the war also lasts for eighteen days. Tharoor has tried to preserve the figure by eighteen episodes of his novel. The titles of the chapters are very suggestive and Indo-nostalgic, based on famous literary works most of them about India; for instance: ‘A Raj Quartet’, ‘The Sun also Rises’, just to mention a few of them.

The chapter entitled ‘The Duel with the Crown’ exposes through parody the coloniser’s racial arrogance in regarding India as a backward country without any culture or civilisation. Sir Richard, the typical English administrator, is shown as lacking the patience even to learn the language of Indian people. He maintains that Hindustani is “a damn complicated language with different words and genders for everything.” (p. 36) He misuses native words like jamadar (sweeper) for bhisti (a water carrier) and a bhisti (a person) for a lota (a small water pot). The title signifies, in a broader sense, the duel of language, a contest fought with canons rather than canons, a cultural rather than a physical duel, played out between Sir Richard, the representative of the Crown, and the people in India to govern. The resident’s failure to take the trouble to learn Hindustani represents on a larger scale the failure of the British to understand Indian culture. Similarly, the chapter ‘Forbidden Fruit’ brings into a sharp clash with two distinct world views in the person of Sir Richard (representing the coloniser) and Gangaji/Gandhi (representing the colonised). Tharoor clearly places the decolonised personality of Gangaji/Gandhiji against the colonialist and an average Indian.

Tharoor takes recourse to the ancient Indian tradition of Vakrokti to expose weakness of contemporary society. “India was well on the way to becoming the
seventh largest industrial power in the world, whatever that may mean, while eighty per cent of her people continued to lack electricity and clean drinking water." (p. 293) Moreover, he asserts:

The British neglected village education in their efforts to produce a limited literate class of petty clerks to turn the lower wheels of their bureaucracy, so we too neglected the villages in our efforts to widen that literate class for their new place at the top. (p.47)

The history that, Ved Vyas endeavours to narrate begins with Gandhiji’s (Gangaji’s) advent on the political scenario during the British Raj and it ends with the fall of Janata Government and re-election of Indira Gandhi (Priya Duryodhani). There is also a passing remark to her assassination. The Great Indian Novel, like that of Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children combines history, myth, fiction and fantasy all in one to deal with almost the same period of history of subcontinent to project Indo-nostalgia. Interestingly, Tharoor makes explicit references to his much-honoured predecessor Ved Vyas, while recalling the glories of the attainment of Indian Independence, he mentions:

Children being born at inconvenient time of night who would go on to label a generation and rejuvenate a literature. (p.239)

Like R. K. Narayan, Tharoor maintains an ironic detachment between himself and his central figure through whose realisation all the events are presented. It would be appropriate to contend that, Tharoor rather procreates history than propagates it. In this context, Om P. Juneja (1995:21) opines:

Fiction is here counterposed as the ‘other’ of history because both fiction and history are discursive practices subject to questions of authorship and also because both require an act of reading before they can have meaning. The reader in both these discursive practices has to have a binocular vision to perceive the allegorisation of history.

Tharoor’s Indo-nostalgic discourse on history begins with his contemplation of the concepts of ‘beginning’ and ‘end’. The Indians, he says, have an “instinctive…sense that nothing begins and nothing ends – neither history, nor art, nor even life…we are all living in an eternal present in which what was and what will be is contained in what is.” (p.163) He conceives of history in its philosophical aspect which makes it obligatory to understand the past not only in
terms of the present but also in terms of the past. It is true that no historian can
reconstruct the past in its entirety. He has to produce an intelligible and readable
account, that is, make a rhetorical construct from the past, a past which is always
in the form of flux of events in time. However, whatever fragment of the past is
reconstructed by the critical gaze of the historian, the thin line separating
‘wisdom’ from ‘knowledge’ has to be kept in mind. The past is a collective entity,
the result of the efforts of hundreds and thousands of people – nameless, faceless
and unrecognised; but when it is shaped into a written nostalgic historical account,
it is, like history, an ensemble of the lived experience of the people but Tharoor
believes history to be blind like Dhritarashtra; therefore, it repeats its mistakes. It
is a quest for freedom from clutches of history. As his Ved Vȳs justifies:

This story, like that of country, is a story of betrayed expectations, yours as well as our characters. There is no
story and too many stories, there are no heroes and too many heroes, what is left out matters almost as much as what is
said. (p.411)

Tharoor has posited the ancient concept of dharma as a value both in the
reconstruction of the past and its evaluation. Dharma looms large over the
narrative to expose intense religion bound Indo-nostalgia, informing all of its
components, especially characterisation and theme. However, its significance is
explicitly analysed in the last book of the novel, “The Path to Salvation.” The
Great Indian Novel ends on an optimistic and religious note. As India is united by
only a single sacred dharma, it reinforces the unity through ages by laying
paramount emphasis on dharma.

If there is one great Indian principle that has been handed
down through the ages, it is that of the paramount importance
of practicing dharma at any price. Life itself is worthless
without dharma. Only dharma is eternal. (p.417)

Yudhishtir intrigues by this assertion of dharma and contradicts. Through
his contradiction, Tharoor captures the essence of Indo-nostalgia, as he
emphatically avers:

India is eternal…but the dharma appropriate for it at different
stages of its evolution has varied…but if there is one thing
that is true today, it is that there are no classical verities, valid
for all time. (p.417)
Tharoor seems to have unerringly hit a bull’s eye at this precise moment. Despite his ‘far too many liberties with the epic’ he has been unfaithfully faithful to the epic; for between the first and the last lines he has unfurled the history of one of the most turbulent eras of Indian subcontinent. His views are aptly reflected in his narrative. Stating another interesting feature of Tharoor’s pluralistic historiography, opines T. N. Dhar (1999:218):

That he does not consider it a Western concept, though one can see that it is an offshoot of a peculiarly Indian phenomenon, which is both a source of strength and weakness of its people...

The first and foremost character of the novel projecting Indo-nostalgia, is the narrator Ved Vyas, the revered, born out of a sage Parashar and the fish scented maiden Satyavati. It is he, who carries in him the seed of the magnificent banyan tree that the epic is. Just as the Mahabharata is narrated by Ved Vyas, the epic poet, so also is Tharoor’s The Great Indian Novel is narrated by the epic poet’s namesake - Ved Vyas. He is not simply the Sutradhar employed in classic Sanskrit or Greek plays, nor is he merely a first person narrative device employed in realist fiction. Ved Vyas is, rather, an authorial voice used to discourse Indo-nostalgia. In the process, Tharoor decodes the ‘Manichean code’ and negates the imposed superiority of the coloniser and tries to break the hegemony of the oppressors. To emphasise his yearning for rich Indian past, he says:

This is my story of India. I know, with its biases, all mine...every Indian must forever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. (p.373)

Being related to foreign services himself, Tharoor seems historically, politically and ultimately more conscious to echo his concerns. He is not happy with the imperial version of history. Ved Vyas, conveniently voices his Indo-nostalgic concern:

They tell me India is an underdeveloped country. They attend seminars, appear on television, even come to see me...to announce in tone of infinite understanding that India has yet to develop...I tell them they have no knowledge of history and even less of their own heritage. I tell them that if they would only read the Mahabharata and the Ramayana, 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. (p. 18)

In Tharoor’s own words (1998:6):

In *The Great Indian Novel*, after all, by taking the
*Mahabharata*, taking the more contemporary myths of our
national struggle and putting this peculiar sensibility in the
retelling of the story as a satirical novel of twentieth century
India, what I have done is I’ve cast the lights of our ancient
legends upon the events of the more recent part, but I’ve also
cast light on a contemporary nineteen-ninety’s sensibility on
the lessons we have taken for granted from our history and
our mythology and therefore there is this refraction of two
kinds of light that I’ve tried to achieve ...so that is the spirit
in which I’ve offered it to you.

3.1 Contextualising the *Mahabharata* through miscellaneous literary insights
to depict Indo-nostalgia:

The *Mahabharata* has been a source of imagination to almost all artistic
genres to project Indo-nostalgia down the ages. It can be summed in one line as
the eternal conflict between virtue and vice. It cannot be considered as a text but a
tradition. The complex and many storied plot of this enormous epic, largely in oral
tradition, have been handed down from generation to generation. At times, it is
also equated with ‘Itihasa’- the way it was and not a *Kavya* ‘poem.’ In the opinion
of Chaitanya Krishna (1987:36) “For a few scholars, it is just a loose leaf file of
palm leaves with a knot that holds the leaves together, to which anything at all
could be and was, added by any one at all, at different times.” Closely bearing a
resemblance to the opinion, Tharoor himself (1990:5) puts the literary worth of the
*Mahabharata* as:

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.
It was a challenge to strike familiar chords while playing
unfamiliar tune. This is not a mean achievement.

Undoubtedly, in many cultures, myths and epics both reflect and contribute
to the national consciousness. Just as the *Iliad* stands at the beginning of Greek
literature, so at the beginning of Indian literature stands the *Mahabharata*.
However, the literary traditions of Greek came into existence after Homer; the
entire corpus of Vedic writing has preceded the Indian epic, though the Vedic literature definitely differs in style, structure and purpose. However, Ved Vyasa, the master narrator, has enshrined the main plot of the war and number of sub-plots quite completely. In doing so, he has exploited all the existing traditions of writing. It is written at the end of the *Mahabharata* itself.

\[\text{Dharme charthe ch kame mokshe ch Bharatshabh} \\
\text{Yadihasti tandnyatra yannehasti n krutrchit. (p.812)}\]

It signifies that all the other works echo the ideas regarding religion, economy, aspirations and salvation of life as they are depicted in the *Mahabharata*. What is not depicted in the *Mahabharata* is nowhere else to be found. Therefore, history and novel can also be found in it, if we suspend our disbelief for a while. Tharoor has no hesitation in seeking parallels from the great Indian epic. He has displayed a shrewd matching skill in making the characters of the *Mahabharata* walk, talk, act, procreate and die in the contemporary setting of India, before and after her independence. Acknowledging his indebtedness to the *Mahabharata*, the author says:

Many of the characters, incidents and issues in the novel are based on the people and events described in the great epic the *Mahabharata*, a work, which remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India. (p.419)

The view of the author about his own creative work holds the mirror to the Indo-nostalgic writing attitude which does not only concentrate to capture Indianness but the Indian literary foundations like the *Mahabharata*, creating India as a whole. However, the *Mahabharata* undoubtedly, is the content of our ‘Collective consciousness’; the all embracing canvass of Vyas’s *Mahakavya*, which provides a cathartic liberating experience, simply because it refuses to exclude anything. It is not only the biggest of the world’s epics and an authentic treasure house of India’s philosophy, religion and culture but it presents graphic tale of Indian men and women. It is a whole literature in itself, ageless and everlasting. It would, undoubtedly, visualise Indians to meditate modern India well via the *Mahabharata*. From times immemorial, it has been a code of life for the Indians. On this, Krishna Chaitanya (1987:36) remarks:
The *Mahabharata* is not only the story of the Bharatas, the epic of an early event which had become a national tradition but on a vast scale the epic of the soul and the religious, ethical, social and political ideals and culture and life of India.

Tharoor’s Ved Vyasa is a typical Indo-nostalgic narrator who narrates the story to south Indian intelligent Ganapathi, who puts forth a condition that, the narrative should not be broken. In reply, Ved Vyasa puts a counter condition:

I made my own condition: that he had to understand every word of what I said before he took it down and I was not relying merely on my ability to articulate my memories and thoughts at a length and with a complexity, which would give him pause. I knew that whenever he took a break to fill that substantial belly or even went around the corner for a leak, I could gain time by speaking into my little Japanese tape recorder. (p. 18)

On these blurred lines of time, Tharoor works out his idea of blending the eternal present and the past together. There is a multiplicity of truths. He (1990:8) aspires for greatness and says “a greatness that has emerged from the fusion of its myths with the aspirations of history.” This conscious use of myths is a familiar literary device, to represent Indo-nostalgia, used by many contemporary writers. For Tharoor, it is not just a digressional technique, but more like, to borrow Chinua Achebe’s term an ‘act of atonement’ (1975:44-45) Wole Soyinka (1995:14), calls it ‘race retrieval’ an essential job of a post colonial writer:

Which involves, very simply, the conscious activity of recovering which has been hidden, lost, repressed, denigrated or indeed simply denied by ourselves – yes, by ourselves also - but definitely by the conquerors of our people and their Eurocentric bias of thought and relationship.

Tharoor does not negate the possibilities of alternative histories. In a pluralist situation like India’s, no single version of history is acceptable. His rejection of colonial version does not silence the possibilities of other Indian voices. In one of the interviews, he (1998:6) expresses his nostalgic concern about India as:

My notion of an Indian identity is in any case a plural identity that cherishes disparity. I think the nature of India is such that our nationalism is not based on narrow identity...nor geography, nor religion, nor that of any race in the western
sense...it’s the fact that we are sharing certain dreams together.

Moreover, The Great Indian Novel is a literary magnum opus 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 garb of the ancient tale of storytelling. The work is a deconstruction veritable of Vyas’s epic the Mahabharata. The superimposition of the political events of the twentieth century on the basis structure of the Mahabharata is made credible by variations in stylistic levels and tones through the corridors of Indo-nostalgia. The following thought, which stays in the present and refuses to merge into the mythic material:

We Indians cannot resist obliging the young to carry our burdens for us, as you well know, Ganapathi, shouldering mine. So they asked the educational institutions, the schools and colleges to mark the centenary as well, with more scholarly forums but also parades and marches and essay contests for the little scrubbed children who had inherited the freedom Gangaji had taught so hard to achieve. (p.47)

It affirms that, Indians are nostalgic of celebrating birthdays and anniversaries. They make their children commemorate the events by marches and parades and burden them in their educational institutions. Transformation of the ancient myth into contemporary politics seems to have been more successful than the transformation of contemporary politics into myth of some kind or other. The extreme virtuosity of the author is to be seen in the verse passages sections 50-55 of the ninth book form. The author employs racy style with witty expressions and twists to celebrate Indo-nostalgia with an extreme vigour of reclaiming and reinventing the true image of India in the eyes of Indians as:

To speak, and write, and walk and fast
Will never break our shackles;
But those who still live in the past
Well, they just raise my hackles. (p.176)

However, the novel opens with the sentence, making cryptic remark on India “They tell me India is an underdeveloped country” and the last sentence is the same “They tell me India is an underdeveloped country.” This circularity is reinforced by the self-reflexive Indo-nostalgic tone of Vyas’s words to Ganpathi, at the end. In retelling the well-known story, nearly three-thousand years old,
Tharoor deliberately devalues the religious sanctity of the original by referring to the sublime achievements of the grand heroes in terms of current language and idiom. For instance, Lord Ganpathi is described as a dim-witted stenographer employed by Ved Vyas, the narrator of the epic, to take down his dictations. Telling the story of his life and times, Tharoor's Vyas declares unashamedly:

I was born...a bastard...the offspring of a fisherman, seduced by a travelling sage. (p.19)

Shashi Tharoor displays an Indian son's commitment towards his mother, when king Vichitravirya dies childless, leaving behind his two widow queens. Satyavati, the queen mother, sends Vyas to procreate to the throne. She thinks:

If he's anything like his father, he can certainly do the job. (p.31)

Vyas upholds his mother's promise and says obediently:

...and indeed I could. We Brahmin sons never deny our mothers and we never fail to rise to these occasions. I rose. I came." (p. 31)

Faithfully duplicating the eighteen parvas of the Mahabharata, Tharoor divides his novel into eighteen books, each bearing an imaginative title taken from the well known work with an Indian context to project Indo-nostalgia. A few instances would suffice: 'The Twice Born Tale', 'The Duel With the Crown', 'Midnight's Parents', 'Darkness at Dawn', 'Passages through India', 'The Rigged Veda', and 'The Bungle Book.' The author wittily superimposes the structure of the Mahabharata on the history of the Indian freedom struggle, distorting the original text. The heroic figures are burlesqued and caricatured as men and women of straw, who indulge in their various political games. Bhishma, the celibate stalwart of the original the Mahabharata, is renamed Gangaji, who bears a marked resemblance, in word and deed to Gandhiji. Following the same mock epic mode, the blind Dhritarashtra is visualised as a power hungry Jawaharlal Nehru, Pandu is Subhash Chandra Bose, Vidur is Sardar Patel, Yudhishtir is Morarji Desai, Drona is Jay Prakash Narayan. Karna is Mohammed Ali Jinnah, who succeeds in carving out his cherished Karnistan out of the original undivided kingdom. The Kaurava clan represents the powerful Congress party. Draupadi symbolises various entities at different times in the retold epic, but she is obviously 'democracy' very much at
stake in the great gambling match of Indo-nostalgia and the subsequent Dharma Yudha at Kurukshetra. Even Lord Krishna is not spared by the satiric and Indo-nostalgic enclosure of Tharoor. He is described as a local MLA and the Kaurava party secretary for a remote taluka in Kerala. When both Yudhistir and Duryodhani seek his support before the onset of the battle, which is projected as an electoral contest, Krishna emphasising dedication and discipline of Indians, says:

One side can have me, alone, not as a candidate, with no party funds, but fully committed to their campaign; the other can have the massed ranks of my party workers, disciplines and dedicated men and women. (p. 392)

Thematically, The Great Indian Novel focuses on the striking parallels between the great epic battle of India, the Mahabharata and the historic freedom struggle. It is skillfully blended to create an ever-changing Indo-nostalgic thematic structure. Though it ceases to be a simple fiction, it is transformed into historic and graphic meta-fiction; where the novelist uses history as a base and revisits the Indian past with objectivity through the dimensions of Indo-nostalgia.

The novelist uses the resources of fiction for providing their vision of the past, in which they either choose to retrieve the history of groups and classes marginalised in established histories and to problematise the historical discourse. Tharoor’s use of the Mahabharata as a structuring device for writing his version of India’s past in The Great Indian Novel in which he contests various historiographical traditions makes it a complex and interesting history through the backdoor. By casting actual people in history, in the mould of characters from the epic, Tharoor aims at writing a version of India’s history which would be ‘laden with resonance and nostalgia’, in which actual people and events would gain significance through the ‘mythic charge.’ Speaking of the various changes and adjustments, Tharoor (1990:1-2) avers:

...the yoking of myth to history restricted some of my fictional operations: as the novel progressed, I was obliged to abandon novelistic conventions and develop characters who were merely walking metaphors. Draupadi, thus, became emblematic of Indian democracy, her attempted disrobing a symbol of what was sought to be done to democracy not so long ago.
The resonance and charge in the narrative is not realised merely by Tharoor’s contextualising actual people and events in a suggestive frame but also by the model on its own. Highlighting the feature, Iravati Karve (1969:17) has rightly stressed:

Apart from its eternally relevant core, the epic has a surprising element of perennial contemporaneity, which has accounted for its popularity and relevance in every age.

This fact has been admitted by the author himself. The multi-coloured nature of the epic, with its loose, episodic structure, due to its multiple levels of accumulation, provides Tharoor with the opportunity to try and use a wide range of stylistic variations in his narrative which he has exploited cleverly for critiquing historical personages and events. If Rushdie found that the history of Pakistan in *Shame* could be represented only through tragedy and farce, Tharoor felt that the history of India could be refracted only through the vein of Indo-nostalgic satire. For it, he chooses several forms of diverse literary styles such as pun, wordplay, light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, playful stories and witty digressions. In this regard, Tharoor (1990: 17) comments:

The story of India, like that of *Mahabharata*, had to come across as a tale of many tellers even if it is ascribed only to one.

The entire narrative is dictated by the participant narrator, Ved Vyas to Ganpathi, as Rushdie employed in *Midnight’s Children* the Indian oral tradition to give Saleem Sinai’s story a definite cultural character. Like Saleem Sinai, Ved Vyas not only narrates his version of the history of India but also comments on the historical discourse. His selective recall of the past with the help of his memory approximates Saleem’s version of memory’s truth. But unlike Saleem, Tharoor (1990:18) states more explicitly that ‘his account has been prompted by his desire to have lessons for the future.’ That is why, in spite of its overall tone of playfulness and irreverence, he wants the novel to be read as a serious work and not a piddling western thriller. The account is stuck in Ved Vyas’s awareness of the historiographic contest, which has characterised the recreations of India’s past, both in history and its representations in fiction. The overall spirit of the narrative, which constitutes one of the three epigraphs of the novel, can be suggested in the words of Gunter Grass (1987:7) as:
Writers experience another view of history, what is going on, another understanding of progress...literature must refresh memory.

This is a significant statement on the author’s lively association with history, which reflects an influential trend of Indo-nostalgic interface with the West and the third world. It not only provides space for fictional recreations of history but also underlines their need. Grass states that writers provide a view of history which is different from that of historians; it helps in renewing people’s nostalgic memory of their past.

In conformity with the narrative design of the Mahabharata, Tharoor begins his account from the time of the birth of the narrator Ved Vyasa and then moves on to the King Shantanu, his affair with Satyavati, the appearance of Bhishma and the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidur. The birth of the five Pandavas is described according to the original, though Tharoor spices it with humour and witty comment. The wives of Pandu, who have their children from other beings, speak in the modern idiom, even with a bit of lightness. This gives the account an occasional parodic tinge, but his characters in a modern setting, which helps him, make the account diverting. The narrative also makes room for a large number of incidents which are not necessary for its historical design. These include the adventure in the Lakshagraha, Bhim’s affair with Hidimba, Arjun’s banishment for a year, in which he combines business with pleasure, his love for Subhadra and his humiliation at the hands of Kameshwari. To overcome the problem of equalising some key events from the epic into the chronological frame of the historical account, Tharoor shifts them into a dream world in which contemporary characters are:

...transported incongruously through time to their oneiric mythological settings. (p.355)

He chooses it for dramatising the scene of disrobing of Draupadi and the ascent of Yudhishtir to heaven. The inclusion of all these scenes gives Tharoor’s narrative the magnitude, solidity and digressive quality of the original. In a sense, he provides his version of the present day Mahabharata, without its serious tone. It is because, he is not interested in the epic itself; he uses it only as a frame for
accommodating another narrative, for which it provides a suggestive cover of nostalgic inference and detail.

Tharoor’s version of Indo-nostalgic historical account begins roughly from the time when Gandhi entered into Indian politics to the time Mrs. Gandhi returned to power after the fall of the Janata government. Ved Vyas’s claim for his account as a definitive memoir of his life and times characterises the historical account as well. Gandhi is represented through Bhishma, also called Ganga Datta, for bringing him nearer our times. Since like Bhishma he gave up claim to power and governance of the country, it leaves two main contenders from the later progeny. Dhritarashtra and Pandu, who stand for Nehru and Subhash. The narrative suggests that Nehru gains influence in the party hierarchy and succeeds in controlling the reins of power in the post-independence India, because of the blessings of Gandhi. This is suggestively reinforced by Bhishma’s continuance in the court of Dhritarashtra, even after he knows of the falsity of the Kauravas. Another contender for power is a member in the same clan, but the circumstances of his birth prevent him from coming to the forefront. He succeeds in raking away a chunk of territory from the country to set up the state of Karnistan, which stands for Pakistan; this particular detail, Nehru, is succeeded by Duryodhani. The fact that she equals the whole of Kaurava clan is meant to suggest what one political commentator remarked about her cabinet.

She tries her best to keep the Pandavas away from the crown and devises stratagems even to finish them off. For mixing human beings with institutions, Tharoor observes some similitude with the original. Since Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi dominates the political scene in the post-independence India, they dominate the narrative as well. Most of the time, Pandavas are away from the corridors of power and very appropriately spend their time with their Guru Drona, who stands for Jayaprabak Narayan. Thus, Tharoor manages to fit the main events and personalities of pre and post-independence India within the plot-outline of the main narrative to offer Indo-nostalgic touch to the text.

Through the balancing of the two way process of adapting historical reality to fit the requirements of the original and by incorporating into the narrative most of its diverting incidents, Tharoor works out a wonderful mixture of the real and
the fantastic as in *Midnight's Children*. He, of course, does not make use of the grotesque, the way Rushdie did. Tharoor also succeeds in providing the narrative the totality of romance of the original. Simultaneously, he prepares the reader to alternate between the literal and the emblematic modes. Some characters and happenings are to be understood the way they have been represented, others for the things they represent. The reader’s responsibility in *The Great Indian Novel* is to work conceivable parallels between the historical and the mythical, to grasp their implications, through the perspectives of Indo-nostalgia, for understanding his version of India’s past. Since, Ved Vyas dictates the narrative to his amanuensis Ganapathi in several short and long spells, digressions, in which he addresses issues relating to historical discourse and the nature of the historical process.

…I told you stories never end, they just continue somewhere else. In the hills and the plains, the heaths and the hearts, of India. I have told you my story so far from a completely mistaken perspective. I have thought about it Ganapathi, and I realize I have no choice. I must retell it. (p.418)

It provides for the novelist, with space for articulating his views through him. Ved Vyas distinguishes between past as a flux of events in time and past as an intelligible and readable account produced by the historian. He accepts that, the past being a collective entity, can be shaped into a written, historical account. This is a problem inherent in the very process of composing history through the elements of Indo-nostalgia. Ved Vyas illustrates this with reference to the independence of India:

Independence was not won by a series of isolated events but by the constant, unremitting actions of thousands...of men and women across the land. We tend, Ganpathi, 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. If life were a play the noises offstage and for that matter the sounds of the audience, would drown out the lines of principal actors. That, of course, would make for a rather poor tale; and so the recounting of history is only the order we artificially impose upon life to permit its lessons to be more clearly understood. (p. 109)
The idea of history as an ordered composition hints at two things: first that we have to pay attention to the role of rhetoric in its creation; second, that the ordering may not necessarily be prompted by the historian’s disinterested obligation. By accommodating only some events, happenings and people into their ordered versions, the historians exercise choice, which also suggests a lurking pattern. The happenings and events which get left out in any ordered narrative may not be of lesser significance than the ones which get included. As part of what Ved Vyas describes “Unrecalled past”, the things that get left out provide scope for other narratives, which can be equally interesting and valuable. Ved Vyas’s version is based on his nostalgic memory:

The faltering memory of an old man; other in the events I describe. (p.163)

Tharoor displays his art of versification by writing a few stanzas to picture Indo-nostalgia. He insists on its truth-value, even though he knows that it is only a selective account, in a series of metaphors figuring in a short poem as:

The song I sing is neither verse nor prose
Can the gardener ask why he is pricked by the rose?
What I tell you is a slender filament
A rubbing from a colossal monument
But it is true.
I am not potter, or sculptor, nor painter, my son
Do the victor or loser know why the race must be won?
I am not even kiln, not hand, no, not brush,
My tale is recalled, words plucked from the crush-
But it is true. (p.164)

Ideally, the purpose of recording the past is to search out the truth about it by judiciously selecting, arranging and interpreting the material. It matters little how much we select but what is of consequence is how discriminately we select. Tharoor is self-consciously aware of the impossibility of including all of the past in any reconstruction of it. But at the same time, he is almost Indo-nostalgic and dogmatic about the narrative that it must tell the truth. In spite of his assertion that his account is true, he unhesitatingly admits to the possibility of its being limited:

...for every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you have omitted and of which you are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions,
distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth... (p.373)

This persuasive proclamation captures the essence of Indo-nostalgia on the nature of historical discourse. It admits that history is not only provisional but also plural and provides for limitations, which come in the way of their producing full and total accounts and closely resembles Rushdie’s idea of the fragmentary nature of our perception. Very interestingly, Tharoor, like Rushdie, also refers to the possibility of historical reconstruction touching the extreme slide into non-history:

How much may one select, interpret and arrange the facts of living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy? (p.164)

In fact, in spite of the awareness that Tharoor has, of reconstructing the past to validate Indo-nostalgia and the provisional nature of the discourse itself, he is keen on giving his versions; expressing his faith in the value of history. Tharoor (1990:6) asserts:

The tone and tenor of my version of India’s history is shaped by my consciousness of the historiographic contest is borne by the fact that it makes reference to earlier accounts...

His chief complaint is against the ones which gave too much importance to the role of Nehru. He is particularly unhappy with versions made current after Nehru’s death by the Congress party, particularly by Mrs. Gandhi. In the same vein, the narrative disapproves of the faltering estimates of Jayprakash Narayan’s abilities and his role during the emergency. However, his dissatisfaction with older accounts does not lead to any radical shift in his methodological apparatus or his historic stance, which could be considered a weakness of his version too. He does not approach the story of India’s freedom struggle through classes which played an important part in the national movement but were overshadowed by leaders of higher stature.

It is difficult to say whether Tharoor’s allegorical mode to cast Indo-nostalgia, foreclosed his option or whether the choice reflects his understanding of the essence of what happened in India’s freedom fight. Given what we have, all that we can say is that, Tharoor’s account is no more than an alternative version of the extant elitist versions. He implicitly criticises them, because he thinks that they need to be redressed, to be cured of tilts and imbalances. However, though
Tharoor recognises the role of heroes in histories, he neither romanticises them nor he is unduly deferential towards them:

...this is one memoir which will not conceal the crassness of its heroes. No more than it will be embarrassed by their greatness. (p.333)

Another interesting feature of Tharoor’s pluralistic historiography on the literal grounds of Indo-nostalgia is that he does not consider it a western concept. Though one can see that it bears close resemblance to what obtains there. He considers it the offshoot of a particularly Indian phenomenon, which are both a source of strength and weakness of her people:

How easily we Indians see the several sides to every question! We give too much importance to discourse and relativism and have an instinctive awareness of the subjectivity of truth. (p.373)

Tharoor’s account is also informed with a specific and nostalgic understanding of history, which could partially explain his preference for concentrating on key figures in India’s past. He considers history as a process of birth and rebirths, caused by sudden changes, projecting thereby a kind of catastrophic view of history; for the flowing dance of creation and evolution. It is visualised by him not as a “tranquilizing wave of smoothly predictable occurrences.” But as a series of:

...Sudden events, unexpected happenings, dramas, crises, accidents, emergencies. (p.245)

He explains this catastrophic view with the help of a familiar metaphor as:

This constant rebirth is never a simple matter of the future slipping bodily from the open womb of history. Instead there is a rape and violence and a struggle to emerge or to remain until circumstances bloodily push tomorrow through the parted, heaving legs of today. (p.245)

Tharoor thinks that it is universally true and holds that the key to our learning about what is right and proper is to peep into the rich past of India:

This is a true of you or me as of Hastinapur, of India, of the world, of the cosmos. We are all in a state of continual disturbance, all stumbling and tripping and running and floating along from crisis to crisis. And in the process, we are all making something of ourselves, building a life, a
character, a tradition that emerges from and sustains us in each succeeding crisis. This is our dharma. (p. 245)

Moreover, speaking about the ancient Hastinapur of India, Tharoor becomes more Indo-nostalgic and avers:

Permit an old man a moment’s indulgence in nostalgia. The place at Hastinapur was a great edifice in those days, a cream-and-pink tribute to the marriage of Western architecture and Eastern tastes. (p.31)

3.2 Tharoor’s Indo-nostalgic allusion of Eklavya:

Tharoor’s Eklavya emerges as a representative of a Dalit class. There is well known encounter between the great preceptor Dronacharya and a forester Eklavya. Eklavya’s poor social standing makes it impossible to become a disciple of Dronacharya. When Eklavya shares the first place with Arjuna, Dronacharya demands very stiff fee as ‘Guru Dakshina’. He must surrender the thumb of his right hand to the Guru. Tharoor’s Eklavya tells his Guru bluntly that he cannot pay the fees demanded by the preceptor.

Tharoor has introduced a subtle and apt variation into the ‘Thumb’ business. Vyas’s Eklavya cuts off the thumb of his right hand, thus diminishes forever his skill as an archer. On the other hand, the reason given by Tharoor’s Eklavya for not cutting off his thumb marks the modern disciple’s fraudulence to the preceptor. He says bluntly:

Without my...thumb, I won’t be able to write again. (p.85)

Here, Tharoor underscores the difference between the primary values of the two ages: The mythological tale values and physical prowess.

3.3 Indo-nostalgia through the Portrait of Nehru:

The blind Dhritarashtra in the novel is parodied as Nehru with his stately manner, Cambridge education and belief in Fabian socialism. Tharoor’s negative estimate of Nehru’s abilities and role in the politics of pre and post-independence India is suggested in the allegorical frame to project Indo-nostalgia. He is made into Dhritarashtra, ‘a blind visionary son’ having vaulting ambition and monumental ego. The author attacks his English education in a sarcastic way:

It gave him a formidable vocabulary and the vaguely abstracted manner of the over-educated. (p.41)
Moreover, Tharoor adds the flavour of metaphor to explore Nehru's blindness and ambitiousness about our own nation. He attacks his intellectual blindness very trenchantly:

...the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it was but as he wanted it to be. (p. 85)

His account of Nehru also implicates him in the hasty deal of the partition of the country, by colluding with Mountbatten and his charming wife Edwina. It makes no secret of his amatory liaison with her and charges him with having failed to see that she was used by her husband as his 'Secret weapon' (p. 215) Tharoor holds that, after taking the charge of the affairs of independent India, Nehru bumbled the Kashmir issue and showed extreme shortsightedness in taking it to the United Nations:

He is also charged with the master technique of 'self-perpetuation' by issuing periodic threats of resignation. (p.261)

Tharoor also attacks his major policies. Nehru's emphasis on setting up big and heavy industries in the country is, ill conceived at the literary hands of Tharoor since he ignored the unpleasant reality that eighty per cent of people were without basic amenities of life such as, drinking water, shelter and electricity. It is wrong to concentrate too much on building institutions of higher education, because they were openly turned out products for the international market and ignored the huge forests of illiteracy covering vast regions of the country. The setting up of huge centralised and cumbersome machinery of parliamentary democracy proved ineffective because parliament passed laws that a few implemented and many ignored.

Tharoor's key complaint against Nehru is that at the cost of neglecting the needs of his country, he directed his energies to gain recognition in international flora. He worked for promoting non-alignment without estimating whether the country was strong and powerful enough to give it any credible meaning. The narrator states in a sarcastic tone that:

He and his friend Menon developed into a fine art the skill of speaking for the higher conscience of mankind. Though neither could control the convictions or even the conduct of those who were to implement their policies. (p. 295)
Tharoor’s version of the political history of India is the result of his disagreement with earlier versions, especially the sycophantic evaluations of Nehru. By concentrating solely on deficiencies in Nehru’s person and policies, his version touches the other extreme which lacks the balance, one finds in his portrait of Gandhi. If the earlier estimates of Nehru are fired by excesses of one kind, Tharoor’s is characterised by excesses of another kind. It is really a complete and total Indo-nostalgic condemnation. The only credit Nehru gets at the hands of Tharoor is that he is not guilty of meanness and villainy. When he is advised by his ministers to deal with his political adversaries according to the tenets of Kautilya’s Arthasastra, he does not accept it.

In Tharoor’s Indo-nostalgic allegorical design, Indian democracy represented in the person of Draupadi, has a mixed parentage. She is the product of an illicit union of Nehru and Edwina, which signifies that India came into being because of their unholy alliance. Through her marriage to Arjun, Draupadi is shared by his other brothers who personify “The hopes and the limitations of each of the national institutions they served.” (p. 319) During Nehru’s tenure, her health remained stable, but started deteriorating after his death, especially during the time of Mrs. Gandhi. The narrative records how after the short spell of Shishu Pal’s tenure in office, the elders chose Mrs. Gandhi to lead the party, mainly because they thought her pliable.

Tharoor makes a satirical pun on the ministry of External Affairs by calling it the ministry of Eternal Affairs. The transactions that can be made in days go on for weeks and even longer, it means it goes eternally. They are expert at losing important and urgent documents. The author makes an enigmatic remark on Nehru’s firm belief in parliamentary democracy:

...for all Dhritarashtra sins and limitations that was one conviction he never betrayed even though or perhaps because he let no one else come near to being prime minister, he constantly reaffirmed and encouraged the institution of parliamentary democracy in the country.(p.370)

The portrait of Nehru presented in the novel is not at all a flattering one. It seems to balance 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. This metaphorical blindness, together
with his immense ego and cryptic ambition, makes him an appropriate Indo-
nostalgic prototype of Dhritarashtra. The narrative clearly suggests that he gained 
significance in the party hierarchy because of Gandhi’s blessings. Tharoor traces 
his mistakes to his shortsightedness:

Dhritarashtra was guilty only of the insincerity of the blind. 
(p. 295)

The only credit Tharoor gives to India’s first Prime Minister is that he was, 
despite his limitations and drawbacks, a true Indian democrat.

3.4 Indo-nostalgia through the Image of Indira Gandhi:

Shashi Tharoor transcripts the hundred Kauravas as one girl called Priya 
Duryodhani, who is none other than Indira Gandhi and attributes the vices of all 
the Kauravas to her to expose Indo-nostalgia. The only daughter of her father is 
considered equivalent to hundred sons. However, Tharoor prepares the readers for 
a negative portrait of Mrs. Gandhi through a piece of well-conceived anticipation, 
in which he uses animal imagery to suggest the brutality and oppression of her 
times.

[her birth-cry] is a rare, sharp, high-pitched cry like that of a 
donkey in heat and as it echoed around the horse a sound 
started up outside as if in response, a weird, animal moan, and 
then the sounds grew, as donkeys brayed in the distance, 
mares neighed in their pens, jackals howled in the forests and 
through the cacophony we heard the beatings of wings at the 
windows, the caw-caw-cawing of a cackle of crows and 
penetrating through the shadows, the piercing shriek of the 
hooded vultures circling above the palace of Hastinapur. 
(p. 73)

After the unnatural death of Lal Bahadur Shastri, the Congress Party was in 
an uproar over the choice of a leader. The name of Indira Gandhi (Priya 
Duryodhani), who had been the Minister for Information and Broadcasting in her 
father’s cabinet, is proposed and given the support by most of the Party men. 
Thus, Indira Gandhi (Priya Duryodhani) takes up the tiller of the board of Indian 
democracy and the Indians get their first woman Prime Minister, a bud of the 
Nehru clan. During her first year in office:

Priya Duryodhani seemed far more conscious of what she did 
not know than of what she could find out. (p. 339)
Tharoor’s contrasting pictures of Priya Duryodhani are original and highly representative of the contemporary history. Yudhishtir, the son of Dharma, goes through a severe test. He mounts up a chariot in order to travel to the court of history. He is shocked to find his late tormentor seated on a golden throne. He stammers, “This tyrant, this destroyer of people and institutions, this persecutor of truth and democracy seated like this on a golden throne?” (p. 416) Dharma’s reply is not void of truth:

History’s judgments are not so easily made my son, to some Duryodhani is revered figure, a saviour of India, a Joan of Arc burned at the democratic stake by the ignorant and prejudiced. Abandon your old bitterness here, Yudhishtir. There are no enmities at history’s court. (p.416)

At first, Mrs. Gandhi tried to entrench herself by carrying out a series of populist measures, such as the eradication of private purses and the nationalisation of the banks, which made hardly any difference to the people of the nation in general. Later she promoted the culture of slogans, replacing policies. Tharoor blames the left and progressive forces in the country, including recognised political parties, for being taken in by her rhetoric and bluster. In her own party, she reduced even cabinet ministers into non-entities. Her return to power made her more dominant and dictatorial in her style of functioning

...more and more laws went on to the statute books empowering Priya Duryodhani to prohibit, profane, prolate, prosecute or prostitute all the freedoms the national movement had brought to attain during all those years of my Kaurava life. (p.357)

She declared a state of emergency in the country, which proved the most unfortunate part of her tenure. It is interesting as well as significant that the emergency in the country has been considered by the Indian novelists in English as the most traumatic event of post-independence India. Nayantara Sahgal devotes a whole literary endeavour to dramatise its effects on the general ethos of the country. In Rushdie, it becomes the focal point of the degradation in the political and secular character of the country, which leads him to postulate two different kinds of India’s past. In Tharoor’s version, it is a part of the deteriorating democratic culture of the country because of which the blame on Mrs. Gandhi is not as pronounced as in the other two. Tharoor understands the emergency in its
very immediate context, when it was declared by Mrs. Gandhi. He is critical to her
decision but at the same time also blames the people whose attacks pushed her into
taking the extreme step, especially Jayprakash Narayan, who had launched a full
scale movement against her. Though he concedes that areas and censorship and
other repressive measures taken by her were ‘primarily cynical and self-serving,’
he adds that:

I still believed that the political chaos in the country fuelled
by Drona’s idealistic but confused Uprising which a variety
of political opportunists had joined and exploited, could have
lead the country nowhere but to anarchy. (p.369)

His skepticism about the worth of the people who combined against her is
reflected in the comment on their coming to power:

The Indian people gave themselves the privilege of replacing
a determined, collected tyrant with an indeterminate
collection of tyros. (p. 402)

Tharoor’s views on the emergency and the people who fought against Mrs.
Gandhi also stem from his estimate of Jayprakash Narayan. The narrative gives
him his due by documenting in detail how he was far away from the taint of power
and made strenuous efforts for raising the consciousness of the people by
educating them about their rights and duties. He provided moral support to protect
the pillars of Indian democracy, but his complicated thinking proved his undoing.
Despite of the praise showered on him after his death, in which he was compared
with Gandhi, Tharoor makes a mixed comment embarking his Indo-nostalgia:

...he was a flawed Mahaguru, a man whose goodness was not
balanced by the shrewdness of the original. He had stood
above his peers, a secular saint whose commitment to truth
and justice was beyond question. But though his loyalty to the
ideals of a democratic and egalitarian India could not be
challenged, Drona’s abhorrence of power had him unfit to
wield it. He had offered inspiration but not involvement,
charisma but not change, hope but no harness. Having
abandoned politics when he seemed the likely heir-apparent
to Dhritarashtra, he tried to stay above it all after the fall of
wrought fall into the hands of lesser men who were unworthy
of his ideals. (p. 409)

With the coming to power of Mrs. Gandhi, the narrative brings to an end
the story of India’s political vicissitudes. Tharoor’s disillusionment with the
country's declining political culture, its institutional structures, such as the press, bureaucracy and party system have not done much in promoting any meaningful change in the country. He makes us believe that the Indian people in general have perfected the art of living with what they get, strengthening in them their vestiges of fatalism. He visualises a bleak future for the country. This partially explains why people have become obsessive about their past. For some, it is a source of power; for others a comfortable retreat.

Moreover, Tharoor shows how Mrs. Gandhi valued people more than the parliament. Being inherited the British political tradition; she learned the supremacy of the people to the parliament. Tharoor professes how the stability of power relations was maintained by Mrs. Gandhi:

It is not parliament that is supreme, but the people: the importance of parliament arises simply from the fact that it embodies the supremacy of the people. Duryodhani did not understand that there is no magic about parliament in and of itself, and that it only matters as an institution so long as it represents the popular will. The moment that connection is removed, parliament had no significance as a democratic institution. (p.384)

It shows Mrs. Indira Gandhi’s commitment towards the people, rather than the power as the chief characteristic of her democracy. Though the narrative delineates her lonely and neglected childhood spent by the bedside of her perennially sick mother, she is cast into the role of female Duryodhan – Priya Duryodhani: an ironic combination of Indira Priyadarshini and Duryodhan. It is because of her egotism, selfishness, scheming nature, intolerance and undemocratic instinct to eliminate her political rivals, she is conceived of as a modern counterpart of Dhritarashtra’s eldest child. The narrative shows how 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. The novel depicts how she ‘smashed all the pillars and foundations of the world’s oldest anti-colonial political organization.’(p.351) The political totalitarianism under Indira’s rule is subjected to a mocking scrutiny in the narrative:

Her speech-writers peppered her rhetoric with dutiful obeisance to the wretched of the Indian earth, she proclaimed
her democratic pedigree and socialist convictions from every lectern and platform – and she acquired more and more power in their name … (p.357)

3.5 Indo-nostalgia through the portraiture of Gandhi and his Ideals:

Gandhian ideas and ideals continued to dominate the Indian novelists in English even beyond the 40’s of the century. In Kamala Markandaya’s *Nector in the Sieve*, and *A Handful of Rice*, we see the Gandhian concern for the lowly and the lost. In Nayantara Sahgal, Gandhian values are more omnipresent and less overt. *A Time to be Happy* embodies India’s bright eyed optimism after independence. Manohar Mangaonkar’s *A Bend in the Ganges* paradoxically exhibits Gandhi, an upholder of the Hindu-Muslim unity, an advocate of non-violence, an inspiration behind the partition of India. Chaman Nahal in *Azadi* explores the meaning of India’s independence accompanied by the tragedy of partition. He shows Gandhi as an architect of freedom and as a martyr of communal harmony. In *the Crown and The Lion Cloth* Nahal fictionalises the life of Gandhi from 1915 to 1922. Gandhi appears as a character in Anand’s *The Sword and the Sickle* and *Untouchable*, R. K. Narayan’s *Waiting for The Mahatma*, K. A. Abbas’s *Inqilab*, K. S. Venkat Ramani’s *Kundan The Patriot*. These novels in the epic demarcation of the first phase of the Indian freedom movement under the magnetic leadership of the lion-clothed Gandhi shook the century-old pillars of the British rule in India.

One may ask what was it in Gandhian philosophy that left so abiding an impression on Indian novelists in English. Gandhian ideology lent these novels a frame of reference. It linked them to the roots of Indian culture. It created in them a social awareness and helped them to interpret the social reality creatively and indiscriminately. It made them look at man as a social animal, an individual with his responses and reactions. It sent them searching for a national identity. It enabled them to share their intellectual journey through modern and western ideas back to the reinterpretation and renewal of rich Indian tradition. His philosophy and ideals not only recharged the political life of India but also reoriented Indian literary values.

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* explores a parody on both the *Mahabharata* and contemporary Indian society. The chief characters of the
Mahabharata are parodied in the contemporary Indian society. Tharoor has used a prototype of Gandhi and his ideals to validate Indo-nostalgia through his fiction. Tharoor’s version of the historical account begins roughly from the time when Gandhi entered into politics till the time Mrs. Indira Gandhi is returned to power after the fall of Janata government. Gandhi is represented through Bhishma, also termed as Ganga Datta. (Gangaji) The novel gives greater significance to the character of Gandhi. The novel presents a solid and rounded portrait of the father of the nation. The narrative depicts the unique manner in which Gandhi mobilises the Indian masses to fight against colonialism by perfecting the master weapons of non-violence, civil disobedience and truth. It records how he used the weapon of ‘fasting’ not only as a means of bringing his principles to life but also as a potent power 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. (p.105)

Gandhi not only widened the mass base of the Congress Party by bringing common men and women into the mainstream of the freedom movement but also gave a novel direction to Indian nationalism. Tharoor takes cognizance of his infinite fads like toilet cleaning, celibacy and love for the cows. It holds Gandhi responsible for Jinah’s dissatisfaction with the Congress.

Kama was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of Hindu. (p. 142)

In Tharoor’s novel, it is the figure of Gandhi (Gangaji) with whom the mythic setting of the novel starts off and gradually the novel gets “populated by contemporary characters transported incongruously through time to their mythological setting.”(p.355) He works out the idea of the eternal present in an ingenious manner. Despite of using two distinct time frames one for the epic and other for the modern, he combines them into a single one presenting characters, events and situations relating to the Mahabharata simultaneous with the present. The depiction of Ganga Dutta going to the forest with his guests to meet the head fisherman and ask the hand of Satyavati for Shantanu serves as the best instance:
Ganga Datta didn’t travel alone either. In later years he would be accompanied by non-violent army of Satyagrahis, so that the third class train carriages he always insisted on travelling were filled with elegantly sacrificing elite of his followers...but on this occasion it was a band of ministers and courtiers he took with him to see Satyavati’s father. (p.23)

Gandhi is celebrated for awakening public awareness against the British by perfecting the system of non-violence struggle against their unfair exercise of power. As an excellent instance of Gandhi’s triumph, the novel documents his magnetism in Motihari; where he forced the British to see his point of view. The rareness and competence of his concept of truth which entails taking punishment willingly for the strength of one’s convictions is methodically approved:

Truth was his cardinal principle, the standard by which he tested every action and utterance. No dictionary imbues the word with the depth of meaning Gangaji gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by ‘untruthful’ or unjust or violent means. (p. 48)

Gandhi’s concept of non-violent struggle is praised not only for being worthy in itself, but also as a timely and effective method to fight against the British:

Where sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism had both proved ineffective, Ganga took the issue of freedom to the people as one of simple right and wrong...law versus conscience...and gave them a method to which the British had no response. (p.55)

The novel praises Gandhi’s role in India’s freedom struggle, pointing out in particular his honesty and steadfastness of his purpose. The narrative also emphasises that despite of sharpness in Gandhi’s style of functioning, he was a master strategist. The people whom he made into a strong force were convinced that:

They were not led by a saint with his head in the clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground. (p. 122)

On account of the incomprehensible multiplicity of his reading the Vedas, the Gita, the Manu, the Bible, Tolstoy, Ruskin to name only a few - his dividing line between matters worldly and divine often becomes unclear:
His manner had grown increasingly other worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment. (p.26)

This aspect of Gandhi’s thinking, in which he would lapse into the cycle of timelessness, has been severely censured by Mulk Raj Anand, for being inimical to changes which were necessary for shaking Indians out of their fatalistic moorings. Tharoor’s narrative draws attention to its other serious implications. Because of his deep rooted grounding in the Hindu tradition, Gandhi consistently exploited Hindu symbols for exciting people against the British; this made the leaders of other communities conscious of the rising tide of Hindu influence to their identity. It is true that, at nowhere the narrative suggests that, Gandhi caused disaffection among the minorities, but it makes it amply clear that, it led to the alienation of political leaders like Jinnah. This eventually sharpened the conflict between the Hindus and Muslims which led to the division of the country. Though a host of historians have expressed their uneasiness over this aspect of Gandhi’s thinking and practice, it is striking to mention that, how Tharoor catches the disapproval of Jinnah for Gandhi:

The Mahaguru’s traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient texts, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealised Pre-British past that Kama did not believe in...all this made the young man mistrustful of the Great teacher...and Gangaji’s mass politics were, to Kama, based on an appeal to the wrong instincts; they embodied an atavism that in his view would never take the country forward. A Kaurava party of prayer-meetings and unselective eclecticism was not a party he would have cared to lead, let alone to remain a member of (p.142)

Jinnah’s detestation of Gandhi’s ways and philosophy is quite well known and has been widely documented. It is somewhat sarcastic that a person who fought all his life for Hindu-Muslim unity has to be made responsible for encouraging Muslim separatism, but this is evident in Tharoor’s understanding of Gandhi and of several historians too.

Tharoor’s narrative unequivocally criticises Gandhi for breaking his grip over the Congress Party around the time of India’s independence, when it was needed most. He thinks that Gandhi was wrong in letting the question of partition
be decided by his lieutenants. That is why; the scene of Gandhi’s death in Tharoor’s account is important where the mythic charge is at the strongest. He lets Gandhi’s assassin Shikhandin (Nathuram Godse) criticise him for his recklessness of duty and also for neglecting the issue of leadership of the party. His words clearly declare him a failure.

You make me sick, Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive, barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking other reptile’s eggs, an infertile old fool...a man who is less than a woman. The tragedy of this country springs from you... (p. 232)

The harsh words cannot be dismissed as gimmickry and taken lightly. Tharoor reinforces their import by putting in the mouth of the dying leader. Despite of uttering “Hey Ram” Tharoor’s Gandhi says: “I...have...failed.” (p.234)

The novel chooses actual words of diverse world leaders and famous people who spoke on the time of his death. The narrator’s comment suggests several causes for his death, in which both he and the people of the country are caught up. Its entire tone affirms that Gandhi died as a beaten and cynical man:

I will not ask whether Amba/Shikhadin was truly responsible for the Mahaguru’s death or whether it was not India collectively that ended Gangaji’s life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you, Gangaji’s life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you Ganapathi, to reflect on whether Ganga Datta might in fact have been the victim of an overwhelming death-wish, a desire to end a life that he saw starkly as having served no purpose, a desire buried deep in the urge that led him, all those years earlier, to create and nurture his own execution. (p. 234)

Thus, The Great Indian Novel provides a concise and balanced portrait of Gangaji/Gandhi with a view to revive his Indo-nostalgic memory of the father of nation not only among the Indian readers but also around the world. He thinks that although Gandhi left behind a well-documented life, his countrymen have ‘consigned him to the mists and myths of historical legend’ so much so that he ‘might as well have been a character from the Mahabharata’ (p.47) The author believes that Indians have failed to relate the father of the nation to their lives not only because of the ‘bastard educational institutions the British sired on us.’(p.47) but also because of the prevailing political culture of the country after independence in which the ruling elite promoted their own favourite politicians by
pinning the ones they disliked to currency notes and concrete slabs. In this way, Gandhi was effaced from the sphere of moral and cultural influence. In a bitter tone, the narrator says:

Gangaji was the kind of person it is more convenient to forget ...while he was alive, he was impossible to ignore; once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate. (p.47)

Thus, throughout the novel, Gandhi matches his idealism with strong and practical commonsense. He acquires the status of Mahaguru and stands as an uncrowned king of thousands of throbbing hearts. His character is delineated with great care. Emphasizing his greatness, Tharoor’s narrator says:

Ganga seemed to be holding the forces of nature in his hands, recalling the fertile strength of the Indian soil from which had sprung the Indian soul, reaffirming the fullness of the nation’s past and the seed of the people’s future. (p.123)

3.6 Indo-nostalgia through Allegorical Representation of History:

Firstly, the allegorical representation of recent history through the epic narrative provides Tharoor with a number of advantages. The Mahabharata is a foundational text of Indian literature and an inextricable part of its living tradition. Any work of fiction that is modeled on it would be assured of a general acceptability and an interest among its readers.

Secondly, in spite of its mythological background, the epic has a considerable historical core and it embraces virtually all the vital aspects of human experience. This makes it an appropriate model for a fictional reconstruction of national history. The Mahabharata is also an imitable text for writing historical narrative which centers on such themes as power, politics, conspiracy, clash of personalities, institutional structures and individual as well as collective dharma. These thematic concerns are also to be found at the centre of Tharoor’s reconstruction of modern Indian history through the retrospective of Indo-nostalgia.

Thirdly, the Mahabharata, which is generally attributed to Vyas, does not have any fixed text and is believed to have been re-written. The epic affords a good deal of flexibility and freedom to an author who intends to use it as a paradigm. Tharoor thus enjoys the freedom to write his own version of the epic. Finally, the multifarious texture of the epic with its loose, episodic structure gives
Tharoor another freedom, that of using a varied range of styles in his novel. He exploits this stylistic variety to great artistic effect. He (1991:31) contends:

*The Great Indian Novel* is a sprawling narrative which attempts to present the recent history of India in a parodic vein. My avowed purpose in this book is to “throw certain trends and issues into sharper relief than history makes possible.”

Through the deployment of stylistic diversity, Tharoor seeks to approximate another significant aspect of the epic which is highlighted by Shyamala Narayan (1990:35-44) in the essay “Verbal Pyrotechnics: a Note on *The Great Indian Novel*.”:

The story of India, like that of *Mahabharata*, had to come across as a tale of many tellers, even if it is ascribed only to one.

What serves as the catalyst of the allegorical scheme in the novel is the idea that the battle of Kurukshetra, the paradigmatic struggle between good and evil, virtue and vice, *dharma* and *adharma*. As Ved Vyas, the modern prototype of the epic narrator asserts:

History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between dharma and adharma is a struggle of our nation and each of us in it engages in on every single day of our existence. That struggle, that battle took place before...it will continue. (p. 391)

According to Tharoor, the political history of twentieth century India closely resembles and can be properly understood only in relation to the events and the characters of the *Mahabharata*. The battle of Kurukshetra is also an occasion for the restoration of values and the upholding of truth and *dharma*. The historic struggle for the Indian people for freedom from British rule was one such battle. Again, the issues of sharing the kingdom of Hastinapur pitted the Pandavas and the Kauravas against each other that resulted in the fratricidal battle. Similarly, the question of sharing the fruits of power determined the course of the country’s post-independence history and ultimately led to the degeneration of democratic values and the declaration of emergency. The story of values like truth and *dharma* being deserted for selfish and insular ends and the consequent chaos in national life informs the text of both the *Mahabharata* and *The Great Indian Novel*. 
Through a severe denunciation of the postcolonial Indian politics, the author seeks to arrive at binarism: the chaos versus the truth and dharma. The novel shows that contemporary India has been transformed into a ‘muddle’ by her self-serving and tunnel-visioned politicians, the modern prototypes of the ancient Kauravas, who destroyed the glorious tradition of the country represented by Bhishma in the epic and Gandhi in the recent past. It thus makes a daring and innovative use of the epic story for interpreting the historical process and uses the allegorical mode for making a trenchant criticism of the political history and personalities of the twentieth century.

What the *The Great Indian Novel* attempts to underscore is the continuity of the historical process. It demonstrates that even though the great epic warriors died on India’s mythological battlefields long ago, epic battles have been fought for great causes like freedom and restoration of democracy in the modern history of the country. The national movement for freedom from colonial rule and the people’s uprising against Indira Gandhi’s dictatorial regime mark the continuation of the epic struggle between dharma and adharma fought on the battleground of Kurukshetra. Viewed from this perspective, the recent history of India is a reflection of what happened in the *Mahabharata*. The resemblance of the epic and the contemporary history, of tradition and modernity, is further suggested by the fact that instead of using two separate time frames for the mythic age and the modern, Tharoor inextricably fuses them into one, presenting characters and events from the *Mahabharata* as contemporaneous with the present age.

### 3.7 Indo-nostalgia through the Creative use of Myth:

An abiding characteristic of an Indian mind has been to discover connections between myth and reality. It has always been conscious of the recurrence of mythic patterns in contemporary events to evoke the sense of Indo-nostalgia. In this regard, Meenakshi Mukharjee in her book *The Twice Born fiction* (1971:31) avers that:

...the conscious use of myth for enhancing the effect of a contemporary situation is a device that the Indian novelist has emulated from the West but has naturalized it to the Indian soil. A world view is required to make literature meaningful in terms of shared human experience and the Indian epics
offer the basis of such a common background which permeates the collective unconsciousness of the whole nation.

Characters from the the *Ramanaya* and the *Mahabharata* are perennial contemporaries for Indians who admit the continuing influence of the two national epics. C. R. Deshpande’s (1978) *Transmission of the Mahabharata Tradition* refers to the lasting influence of Vyas’s epic on India’s social and cultural life:

The *Mahabharata* has not only influenced the literature, art, sculpture and painting of India but it has also moulded the very character of the Indian people. Characters from the great epic...are still household words which stand for domestic or public virtues and vices...in India a philosophical or even political controversy can hardly be found that has no reference to the thought of the *Mahabharata*.

The second extract from P. Lal’s transcription of the epic, The *Mahabharata* of Vyas, suggests its contemporaneity and continuing relevance.

The essential *Mahabharata* is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the twentieth century. No epic, no work of art is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead.

The author uses myth ornately to function as the prototype to give Indo-nostalgic sense. The ancient epic of Ved Vyas provides Tharoor’s narrative not only the narrative aesthetics but also a pattern of life as well as a value system to refer to his nostalgia. 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 haughty politicians like Priya Duryodhani. The novel makes creative use of mythic material to interpret contemporary history and critically evaluate the role of political personalities of twentieth century India. He uses mythic settings as a parallel to the present age. The remote past and the recent present reflect each other, as in a mirror and this inter-reflection modifies the readers’ usual perception of both the epic and the recent history taking them into the wheel of Indo-nostalgia.

Keeping the original source of the *Mahabharata* in hand, Tharoor’s narrative begins with the birth of the narrator, Ved Vyas in the first book of fiction ‘The Twice-Born Tale’ and ends with the rise of Yudhishtir to heaven in the final book ‘The Path to Salvation.’ The story is narrated according to the original
account in the epic but Tharoor savours it with wit and parody. Pandu’s ‘faithfully infidelious’ wives – Kunti and Madri – are presented as ultramodern women. In this connection, Chaudhury M. K. (1994:105) comments:

...The Mahabharata is the unitary national myth that perceives itself as totality and provides for Tharoor’s novel the most appropriate allegorical background to project modern Indian situation. Tharoor uses the mythic settings of the ancient epic to foreground the eternal present, the continuance of the historical process from India’s remote past to the present.

The novel also houses number of incidents from Vyas’s poem in a slightly modified form, which gives a pleasing sense of nostalgia. For example, the escape of 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 offer the novel an amplitude and digressive excellence of the original epic.

Tharoor’s novel is both allegorical and mythical, in this sense, as it tells the story of the great Indian family of Shantanu and Satyavati interpolated with the contemporary history of British colonialism and the post colonial India. As Ved Vyasa, the narrator, tells Brahma:

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 been. (p.18)

Besides these, the novelist shifts some important episodes into a dream world with the chronological frame of the historical narrative. These include the murder of Gandhi, the disrobing of D. Mokrasi during Indira Gandhi’s rule and the journey of Yudhishtir to heaven. The defeat of Hidimba by Bhima is presented as a parallel to the liberation of Goa by Indian army from Portuguese occupation; the tearing off of the body of Jarasandha into two halves by the second Pandava mirrors the dismemberment of Pakistan and the creation of Bangladesh. The humiliating defeat of Sahadeva in the wrestling match with Bakasura during the period of exile reflects India’s military debacle during the Indo-China war in 1962.

Thus, by using myths and legends in The Great Indian Novel, Shashi Tharoor works in the ‘mythical modes.’ The mythical mode gives the narrative the
magnitude and enables the author to authenticate the Indo-nostalgic experience. It also helps him to facilitate two different time schemes, the mythical and historical within the fold of the narrative. It not only expresses his strong desire to project Indian consciousness but also his deep yearning for the great Indian legends.

3.8 Indo-nostalgia through the artistic use of Irony and Parody:

_The Great Indian Novel_ is not an ordinary work of fiction. It is a historiographic meta-fiction in which the author uses history as a starting point to revisit the mythical Indian past with irony and parody. The _Mahabharata_, recognised as a multidimensional text, is rendered in unequivocal irony and parody in _The Great Indian Novel_ to offer a sense of Indo-nostalgia to the narrative. The novel with its splendid inventiveness and originality exhibits a parody of both the _Mahabharata_ and contemporary Indian history. Tharoor seems to subscribe to Balaswami P. (1994:2) view, who advocates:

> The fundamental right of a creative artist to express himself in whatever manner he likes cannot be denied and the concept of creative freedom would include the medium of expression to which the writer, out of his inner urge, commits himself.

Irony is used in the novel not as a structural device but as a mode of perception. This is evident in the parodic nature of the narrator’s tone and the attitude he adopts in the text. Tharoor builds up a complex network of meaning on several grounds which eventually result in an extremely stylish parody. His use of parody not only determines the choice of form and the elaboration of the subject but also the style and technique of the novel. As an illustration of how parody works in the narrative, the reader may refer to the opening chapter of book one ‘The Twice-Born Tale’ in which Ved Vyasa, the narrator describes Ganapathi who has been sent to him by his old friend Brahm (Brahma) to serve as his scribe:

> The next day the chap appeared the amanuensis. Name of Ganapathi, South Indian, I suppose, with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes...something about him, elephantine tread, broad forehead and all, impressed me. I agreed. (p. 18)

The mocking attitude of the narrator towards the divine scribe and the resultant humour and irony all depend upon the parodic effect which is deliberately produced by an unlikely combination of tradition and modernity, the past and the present, the sacred and the profane. This stance, maintained
throughout the narrative, creates a complex inter-textuality in the novel. Thus, The Great Indian Novel is a kind of Indo-nostalgic foreground which becomes comprehensible only when the reader is conversant with the background text of the Mahabharata and the history of the modern India.

In blending the Indian and the western literary sources and influences, the author consciously wipes out all boundaries of literary cartography and creates a delightful Indo-nostalgic parody. It represents both Dwapara Yuga and Kali Yuga, the twentieth century ultra modern civilisation in a comic and satiric tone. The fiction is replete with the author’s ingenious puns, alliterations, personifications, similes and metaphors. There are striking parallels of works like Kautilya’s Arthashastra, Shantiparvan of Vyas and the Bhagawadgeeta preached by Krishna. The titles of almost all the eighteen parvas are undoubtedly altered versions of the titles of the works suggesting Indo-nostalgic puns. By casting the parody of the Mahabharata, Tharoor re-teaches history to the post modern generation by way of present references. In this connection, Uma Parameswaran (1975:435) remarks:

...such a method allows not only for the reinterpretation of modern history through epic but for the reinterpretation of epic through modern history.

The places in the history are given parodic names and they are charged with political splendour to remark authors indebted Indo-nostalgia. Such places with altered names are Jalianwala Bagh as Bibigarh Gardens, Kashmir as Mimir, Shrinagar as Devpur, Jammu as Marmu, Goa as Comea, and Bangladesh as Gelabin Desh. Even the historic ‘Dandi March’ of Gandhi has not been spared at the hands of Tharoor; it is a ‘Mango March’. On this parodic recurrence, Chaudhury M.K. (1994:111) comments:

...by placing the past vertically on the horizontal present, he integrates a number of key episodes of the Mahabharata into the story, a couple of which are slightly modified, in order to project important political events of the post-independence period.

Moreover, Tharoor allegories the relationship between the coloniser and colonised by parodying certain crucial incidents in the Indian history of the British rule. The most heart-rending incident in the colonial epoch is the Jalianwala Bagh
massacre. He renames it as the Bibigrah massacre. General Dyre is nominated as Rudyard who is referred to Rudyard Kipling. Tharoor dwells at length on the large scale destruction unharnessed by the British police action, focusing the viciousness of the colonial system. The cold blooded murderers’ gratify themselves by saying that, out of sixteen hundred bullets only eighty-four bullets were wasted. The author’s comment, that each bullet of Rudyard destroyed the Raj’s claim to justice and decency:

...by letting it happen, the British crossed that point of no return that exists only in the minds of men, that point which, in any unequal relationship, a master and a subject learn equally to respect. (p.82)

Thus, Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* stands as the multifarious work of art. The Americans always dreamt of producing such a subtle masterpiece called *The Great American Novel* having a head start on their Indian counterpart, but Shashi Tharoor stimulates the American quest of remaking and restricting the great epic the *Mahabharata* as his *The Great Indian Novel*. Commenting on this quest, Chaudhury M. K. (1994:104) avers:

...In fact, the urgency to write a novel of epic magnitude that can render national history by integrating India’s past and present and reflects the totality of Indian experience and the psyche of the country was generated by the Emergency, the dark night of the whole of India that upset known, order, values and norms. 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 realisation that contemporary Indian reality can be understood only in relation to the myths and legends of India’s remote past.

Parody allows Tharoor to speak to his culture through Indo-nostalgic mode. He can indulge in what amounts to almost a sacrilegious and scandalous running down of both the ancient epical and modern Indian characters with impunity and without, disowning his cultural heritage. The parodic mode provides him with both the necessary distancing from his culture and at the same time, the recognition of his own deep stake and involvement with it. Through parody and self-parody, therefore he can both assert and undercut his Indo-nostalgia. As Linda Hutcheon (1988:8) says:
Parody is a typical postmodern paradoxical form because it uses and abuses the texts and conventions of the tradition. It also contests both the authority of the tradition and the claims of art to originality.

At the most obvious level, the parodic mode and intent is evident in the choice of his title; which proclaims what is disclaimed by the writer even before the novel has begun properly. Similarly, in the choice of titles of the eighteen books that make the novel, one can, at once, recognise parodic inversions of several well-known titles of books which have India as their subject. Some among them are: The Jewel in the Crown, The Far Pavilion, Midnight’s Children, A Passage to India and The Jungle Book. It is significant to note that a majority of these works enshrine perception of India, written as they are from a predominantly colonial perspective. Tharoor’s parodic inversion of these titles can, therefore, be said to constitute an implicit criticism of the inadequate portrayal of India by un-inventing the India represented by such works. The parodic intent is sustained throughout the novel through witty asides, puns, and cryptic parentheses. It relentlessly aims at discovering India that is neither idealised nor wholly depreciated but depicted honestly to recover a truer perception of Indian culture through Indo-nostalgia.

In the light of the above analysis, The Great Indian Novel can be estimated as a biting commentary on the political history of India and an Indo-nostalgic text promising and representing Indian reality in relation to myths and legends of India’s remote and rich past. The core idea which is underlined recurrently in the text is ‘Life is Kurukshetra, history is Kurukshetra’ and ‘the struggle between dharma and adharma is the struggle of our nation and each one of us, engage in one single day of our existence.’ (p.391) Thus, the novel by interpreting reality through myth and history in Indo-nostalgic approach makes us to realise that, India has a vast heritage from which much can be learnt. However, though some critics refuse to perceive Tharoor’s text as a postcolonial, with this analysis we can label the text as an Indo-nostalgic text; since in the opinion of Tripathi V. (1994:229) Tharoor is:
A man of many cultures and brought up and educated abroad who has had obviously highly cerebral Western education that seems to have desensitized him to the human cultural matrices of India.

Moreover, *The Great Indian Novel* through the conscious and frequent use of the phrase ‘We Indians’ becomes more conducive and Indo-nostalgic as a literary representation of displacement and defines the sense of Indianness of Tharoor’s expatriate identity and sensibility. Talking about the task of *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor (1994:2) affirms:

To affirm and enhance an Indian cultural identity, to broaden understanding of the Indian cultural and historical heritage and to reclaim for Indians the story of India’s national experience and its own reassertion of itself, including the triumphs and disappointments of independence.

Thus, it would be appropriate to contend that, Tharoor has transported contemporary characters to their oneric mythological settings to offer an Indo-nostalgic picture of modern India through the novel. It is a creative vision of contemporary India retold in an Indo-nostalgic garb of the ancient tale of storytelling. Partly modifying T.S. Eliot’s (1974:1-3) oft-quoted lines, we can assert that, Tharoor has fictionalised India with:

\[
\text{Time present and time past} \\
\text{Are both perhaps contained in time future,} \\
\text{And time future contained in time past.} \\
\]

Indeed, the cover picture of the novel itself, is enough to understand the intention of the author; which mirrors Indo-nostalgia by shedding the universal and unique light of the sun suggesting ‘unity in diversity’ over the diversely dressed people, with diverse *dharmas* and diverse cultural as well as behavioural truths, in a multifarious country like India.

Thus, the novel’s insight may be said to be an offshoot of Indo-nostalgia and India’s pluralistic culture. It grows out of and speaks for India that acknowledges and welcomes multiplicity and honours all interpretations of reality, of the world and the text as potentially valid. It seeks to recover an adequate sense of pride in India’s cultural history and by juxtaposing the past with the present. It attempts to show in human terms, what happened to us and what we have lost. Therefore, the readers are left to make their own assessment of India’s socio-
political and cultural situation. Hence, it would be appropriate to contend that Tharoor is taking an Indo-nostalgic view of history to which:

History...indeed the world, the universe, all human life, and so too, every institution under which we live ...the world and everything in it is being created and re-created ...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. (p.245)