THE MYTHOLOGY OF CULTURE IN SHASHI THAROOR'S THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

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Abstract

Every strong culture has a vital epic tradition. Epics account for the 'beginnings' a civilization, and are enduring tales of reality, myth and history. They offer a commentary on the ancient heroic codes, associations of class, gender, sexuality, justice war, and other processes of a predominantly oral culture. While many great civilizations of the world- Mesopotamian, Sumerian, Egyptian, Aztec, to name a few have disappeared without leaving behind a substantial literary record of the past, India has maintained a rich and enduring literary tradition of Puranas and Itihasas, Jatakas and Anyapadeshas, Natakas, Mahakavyas, Champus and folktales, which even to the present day marks the foundation of Indian popular imagination. Shashi Tharoor's greatest work as well as the most complete work of faction is The Great Indian Novel (1989), which documents his postmodern impressions of contemporary history. His weaves the real and colourful history of twentieth century politics against the backdrop of the epic and blends poetry and prose in an experimental style that helps him shift from serious and inspiring moods to the highly ridiculous.
Keywords: civilization, folktales, imagination, faction, postmodern, contemporary, epic.

Myth has always been a great source of stimulation for creative writers as they are a storehouse of several themes that fascinate both the writers and readers. Humans binges were snooping about the how's and why's of the universe even before the advent of science and this curiosity led them to answers in the form of stories. The hidden meanings in the mythical stories are brought out in the open through these interpretations, and sometimes new knowledge regarding a particular society or culture highlighted. Though the myths are far displaced from the contemporary times, they are found to have a cultural relevance and a social significance. This paper explores the several areas of treatments of myths in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel, with admiration to the postcolonial standpoint taken in a broad sense. Myths have always held a fascination to the Indian mind. The vast ocean of Indian myths provides several layers of comfort to the Indian mind. They are a way of life for the Indians. They are a support system for the various happenings in life. They cannot be ignored even if they are not considered; such is the dominant role of myths in the Indian society. They continue their existence in the midst of political, social, cultural or even personal transformation. The Indian authors have carefully observed this and they have used it to their advantage in their writings. They create a real situation using the imaginary situation of the past, as there has been a common understanding that myths belong to the realm of imagination usually, opposed to the world of reality. The creative writers have adapted, retold or transformed myths to explore much more complex issues of interpersonal, cultural and even political relationships. The treatment of myth is carefully explored in this novel in terms of their allusions, imagery and symbols.

Shashi Tharoor's the great Indian Novel is an astonishing title derived from the ancient epic The Mahabharata. In Sanskrit, 'Maha' means 'great' and 'Bharata' means 'India'. This novel is modern English prose novel whereas Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata is an epic poem in Sanskrit. He reinvents India with a dazzling marriage of Hindu myth and modern history, which is clear at every step and in every moment of the novel. He presents an apt correlation of ancient Hastinapur and the pre- independent India. In order to build up the gap between the old and the new, ved vyasa's Mahabharata to some extent is shown with reference to the autobiographies of Rajaji, Nirad C. Choudari and Gandhiji. Tharoor's Ganapathi is a Southern Indian like C.R. Bhishma is correlated to Mahatma Gandhi. Ghandhari of Mahabharata is blind- folded whereas Kamala is invalid. Dhritarashtra is India's first Prime Minister, Nehru; while the chaste Kaurava pater

families Bhishma, generally referred to Gangaji, is Gandhi. But rather than a hundred sons, Tharoor's Dhritarashtra father a single daughter, Priya Duryodhani the oldest kaurava in the Mahabharata is called Duryoghana, hailed as the further ruler of all India: an obvious reference to Indira Gandhi.

The story is narrated from the point of view of V.V. who is dictating it to a South Indian named Ganapathi. V.V. and Ganapathi correspond to Ved Vyas, the author of the epic Mahabharata and lord Ganesh respectively and just like the epic, Ganapathi agrees to transcribe, provided V.V. works to his pace. V.V. is going to dictate the story of his life and times, the song of modern India in prose which in his opinion can be "nothing less than The Great Indian Novel" (18) He tells: What I am about to dictate is the definitive account of my life and times, and you know what a life and times mine have been. Brahm, 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.(Throor, 18)

V.V. takes the Mahabharata to be the starting point. He tells Ganapathi about his own illegitimate birth as a result of pre- material union of his mother Satyavathi with a wandering sage Parashar. He then builds the early family tree of Hastinapur, introducing its members one by one exactly the way they were in the source text. The incidents like Shantanu's marriage with Ganga, his re- marriage with Sathyavati, Bhism's pledge, Amba, Ambikha and Ambalika episode and their Niyog with V.V. after the death of the king Vichitravirya and the birth of Dhritrashtra, Pandu and Vidur are left untouched as they were in the original epic. Once the stage is set, V.V. brings in the historical persons of his times with a mythic costume over them. Thereafter, the live of the great Indian leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Jawahar Lal Nehru, Subhash Chandra Bose, Indira Gandhi and many others surface in the novel. V.V.'s personal memories plunge into the history, swiftly moving through the incidents of colonial India, freedom struggle and the years of post- Independence India and simultaneously drawing their mythical parallels. V.V. also presents the entire history of India, beginning with India under the regime of the British Empire in the late nineteen or early twentieth century down to India during the emergency and after. It records all the major political historical events of modern India such as appearance of Gandhi in Indian politics with champaran Satyagrah, Jallianwallah Bagh Massacre, the Delhi March, Crips Mission, the Round Table Conference and the Quite Indian Movement along with the events of the Pakistan and India's Independence and Partition, the liberation of Goa, Indo- China, Indo- Pak wars, the birth of Bangladesh and Emergency and the after.

Tharoor's mythologizes political history of postcolonial India and creates a fictional narrative in which the stories of ancient and modern India straddle each other and work to gather to reclaim a holistic image of India's culture heritage. As Ved Vyas, the narrator of the novel stats that this novel is a story "of past present and future, of existence and passing, of efflorescence and decay of death and rebirth; of what is and what was, of what should have been"(Tharoor, 18). He using the Mahabharata's mythical narrative to frame his story of postcolonial modern India participates in the typical Indian tradition. The use of the myth in postcolonial literary text is designed and directed to bring into consideration the glory and significance of colonized nation's indigenous cultural, historical and religious heritage which has been decayed or forgotten due to the imposed colonial ideologies. The study of myth has been interpreted as the strategy of liberation and revival of the cultural heritage for the assertion of identity and self in postcolonial writings. Tharoor's recasting of some of the select recent events and individuals in the matrix of the original Mahabharata, follows the old Indian tradition of blending history with mythology. All the characters of the novel put up with the names and echo the qualities and attributes of the mythical characters of the Mahabharata but, at the same time, explicit embody the historical personages of the twentieth century India. An explicit analogy can be drawn between these

historical and mythical characters. The contrived confluence of mythical characters with historical figures is, most of the times, so natural if not exact that clearly visualize the parallel between the Mahabharata and modern Indian History. The least difficulty in accepting that the poor helpless old Bhisma of the epic is the sidelined Gandhi at the close of partition; that the blind Dhritrashtra is idealist visionary Jawahar Lal Nehru; Pandu is Subhash Chandra Bose; Vidur is Sardar Patel; Duryodhini (effeminate Duryodhan) is Indira Gandhi; and the most significantly Draupadi is our democracy and Pandavas represent the five pillars of this democracy- Yudhisthir as Judiciary, Bhim as Army, Arjun as Press, Nakul and Sahdev as IAS and IFS respectively. He has tried his best to show a parallel between the lives of mythical figures and their historical correspondents but, at the same time, he also does some significant changes to balance his conceited comparison.

The two most vibrant liaisons of the historical with the mythical characters can be found in the delineations of Draupadi and Duryodhan. Draupadi Mokrasi (democracy) is the bastard child born out of the licentious liaison between Dhritarashtra (Nehru) and the Viscounts Georgiana Drewped, the wife of the last Viceroy (the wife of Lord Mountebettan). She is born on the same day India was proclaimed republic, 26 January, 1950 and later she married to five pandavas (the five pillars of our India democracy). Draupadi, describes her as a person who can live, learn and adopt her to the conditions in which she lives. She can easily mix and play with the neighbourhood children, irrespective of caste, creed and culture (democracy). Draupadi is shown to be in dangerously poor health after the death of her biological father. This symbolizes the political turmoil after Nehru's death when there was her sister Priya Duryodhini (Indira Gandhi) is in power. Just like her epic-counterpart, Draupadi, here also, is to be robbed of by Duryodhan. But here Tharoor does some remarkable and significant changes. Duryodhan is changed into equally powerful female Priya Duryodhini, the only daughter of blind Dhritrashtra and Gandhi who stripped the nation off the values and constitutional rights. In the process of superimposition of the events and characters of the twentieth century modern India on the original structure of the Mahabharata, he takes liberties with the original story. The character of Kunti, who is found "smoking Turkish cigarettes, wearing her Banaras sari, Bombay Nails, Bangalore Sandals and Bareilly bangles which advertised her fabled elegance" (Tharoor, 265) and Krishna whose insufficient portrayal proves to be his foremost and glaring failure can be the case point. He succeeds in retelling the political history of modern India through a fictional recasting of events, episodes and characters from the Mahabharata. Simultaneously, he has also re-clothed and infused all those well-known mythical characters and events with contemporary significance. In addition, there are also several incidents that conflate historical with mythical. Analogy drawn between Draupadi and Democracy: Draupadi's (democracy) marriage with Arjun (media) and comparison between mythical events of Draupadi's schirharan and Mrs. Indira Gandhi's declaration of the emergency, all confirm the melange."And Draupadi Mokarsi, still beautiful, began to appear plump, her instinctive smile creasing the flesh of her face in the slightest suggestion of a double chin... (Tharoor, 342) And Draupadi Mokrasi, was diagnosed as asthmatic, her breath coming sometimes in short gasps, the dead air trapped in her bronchia struggling to expel itself, her chest heaving with the effort to breathe freely…" (Tharoor, 352) The entire story leave no doubts that the story V.V. is dictating to his scribe is the history of modern India, starting from Gandhiji's arrival into Indian politics during the British Raj to the Re-election of Indira Gandhi after the emergency, which V.V. has superimposed on the basic structure of the Mahabharata making essential changes and variations in the source text. However, it can also be argued that with the increasing number of characters and increasing complexity and divergence of two histories, the author finds it difficult, at places, to embrace the enormity of his task.

Thus there has been an attempt to re-write the past, especially the colonial past and deconstruct the colonial frame work. Myths have largely contributed to the portrayal

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or interpretation of incidents in the novel discussed above; the postcolonial condition, an additional support in the process of interpretation. In the process, the primary characters in the myths are seen in a new light. The repressed characters in the myths have been given a voice in the novel. It was also perceived that such interpretations of myths were crucial for growth, both for the individual and for the nation. However, human beings are so much a part of the modern mythic environment that they often fail to observe it. Sometimes myth provide an opening and a way of seeing as well as a symbolic solution and resolving of political impasses and sometimes myths are so vague that they can be articulated in a mixture of ways. Myths are also treated as receptacles for potential communication, communication between the present and the past. Perhaps it is the eminence of timelessness of myths that helps the creative writers to re-value them in myriad ways.

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