

Looking into Mythology and History: A Postmodernist Reading of Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract

This research paper offers a postmodernist reading of *The Great Indian Novel* that absorbs the spirit of the great Indian epic composed by Ved Vyasa. The *Mahabharata* is not just an account of heroism or a tale of the conflict between good and evil told in the form of an epic; it is the story of *Bharatavarsha*. The epic provides a glimpse into the cultural richness of Indian civilisation as well as presents a highly developed society before modern readers. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* re-reads the myth of the *Mahabharata* and reinterprets it to suit the scientific minds of the modern readers. The author brings historical episodes in the text which makes the novel a historiographic metafiction. Tharoor studies the *Mahabharata* in the context of the Indian colonial/postcolonial past. He borrows characters from the epic and depicts them as historical personas that shaped the modern history of India. The researcher reads the novel as a parody of the epic and history. The writer distorts the archetypal image of mythological characters and portrays them more realistically. This research paper seeks to find a resolution between myth and history as it attempts to re-read the epic and history through the spectacles of Shashi Tharoor. The researcher opts for a postmodernist approach to study the elements of intertextuality, parody, pastiche, and metafiction in the novel.

Keywords: Archetypal, Colonial/Postcolonial, Historiographic Metafiction, Intertextuality, Pastiche, Parody

Introduction

Through his novel written in 1989 Tharoor presents a defamiliarised set of events that is based on the subject which is familiar and common to all Indian readers. The adverb 'Great' in the title of the novel draws its greatness from the magnanimity of the celebrated epic and history. This novel is not an ordinary story but it is a tale that concerns the every citizen of India. Tharoor, here, attempts to provide an alternate narrative of India that reclaims the originality of the native culture. The researcher would call it a fictional presentation of factual history and the seemingly factual presentation of fictional (what mythology is believed to be) myth.

The Great Indian Novel adapts the story of the *Mahabharata* (the tale of Great India). The novel is a satirical imitation of the epic. The supernatural elements and the grand characters from the mythological story are scrutinised and modernised in

the novel. It also does a deconstructive reading of history where it questions its very authenticity. Here, Tharoor does not try to mock the whole mythology and history rather he presents a postmodern narrative of the both. He is aware (and believes that the *Mahabharata* is part of the great Indian tradition) that for the most Indians, the *Mahabharata* is not mythology but history. They believe that the events and characters of the epic existed in real time and space. For them, the *Mahabharata* is a tale which teaches common folks the way of the world and principles of dharma. Rajagopalachari opines that the text of the *Mahabharata* "discloses a rich civilisation and a highly evolved society which, though of an older world, strangely resembles the India of our own time, with the same values and ideals" (6).

Composed by Maharshi Ved Vyasa, the *Mahabharata* is among the two great epics in the Sanskrit language. In length, it far surpasses

the *Ramayana* which is composed by *Maharshi* Valmiki. The *Mahabharata* "is the world's longest epic poem" that contains 100,000 slokas (Lochtefeld 399). Lochtefeld states, "If the *Ramayana* can be characterised as the tale of "good" family, in which brothers cooperate to support and preserve their family, the *Mahabharata* describes the "bad" family, in which hard-heartedness and lust for power in an extended royal family ultimately cause its destruction". Unlike the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* more truly resonates with the modern world. It is a classic in Sanskrit literature which guides and instructs millions of Indian minds. Johnson claims,

. . . , it is a 'world's classic' . . . an epic, and a body of mythological material as significant for our self-understanding as the works of Homer and Greek dramatists . . . , the Bible, the Qur'an, and more recently, the plays of Shakespeare . . . , like Shakespeare, but with an even wider compass, the *Mahabharata* has acquired, in India and beyond, an iconic and culturally talismanic significance that is reflected in its assessment of itself: 'What is here may be found elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere at all. (ix-x)

The *Mahabharata* presents a story of conflict within a family where the Kauravas and the Pandavas, the two sections of cousins, wage a war for the right over the throne of Hastinapur. The central theme of the poem is the victory of dharma over *adharma*. It may seem that the poem presents a story of a family feud but in truth, it has a universal application. It is a tale of a power struggle which exists in every culture and civilisation. Thus, the *Mahabharata* is not a tale of a family, region, culture or civilisation but it is a tale of humankind. That is why Jeane-Claude Carriere describes the poem as "the great history of mankind" and "the great poem of the world" (viii).

Mythology has a close affinity to dharma. It is also a robust pillar of any great culture which sustains and nourishes the crux values for the future generation. It is a cultural belief system that has been in existence since ancient times. In any social system, mythologies are spread through religion and literature. In fact, "Mythology tends to be speculative and philosophical; its affinities are with religion, anthropology, and cultural history" (Guerin et al. 183). On the other hand, history is a record of actual events and personas that have existed sometime in the past. "History", notes Murry Krieger, "itself must be seen, not as brute facts, but as subjects to the forms of human discourse that creates it as meaningful for the rest of us" (qtd. in Mastud 371). Tharoor documents the history of the colonial past and consequent independence which he parallels with the characters and events of the *Mahabharata*.

The Great Indian Novel re-reads the *Mahabharata* in the context of the colonial and post-colonial past. Through the novel, Tharoor historicises the mythology and fictionalises the history. He picks mythological characters from the epic and portrays them as historical personas who played a crucial role in the Indian Freedom struggle and early post-independence era. While reading the novel, readers are aware of two facts: historical fact as stated in history and mythological fact as stated in the epic and therefore, the fictionality of the work is foregrounded. Using the texts of the epic and history, Tharoor presents characters and events coated in fiction.

Research Methodology

The novel falls into the category of a postmodern Indian English novel which uses mythology to tell the turmoil in Indian politics. Tharoor has implied postmodernist narrative as a tool to narrate history by recasting and re-inventing the characters, events and episodes from the *Mahabharata*. The novel can be

read as a political allegory because the characters represent the actual historical figures in twentieth-century Indian politics. The allegorical juxtaposition of mythology and political history provides the author with an opportunity to comment on the colonial and postcolonial history of India.

The novel is a parody of both mythology and history as the sincerity of both is presented humorously. The author has used postmodern techniques which are characterised by the use of parody, pastiche, intertextuality, the tone of playfulness, temporal distortion, historical metafiction, etc. The narrative technique of the novel deconstructs the archetypal figures of mythology imprinted in the collective unconscious of the Indians. As a methodology, this research relies on the postmodernist approach to foreground fiction “to exemplify the notion of the ‘disappearance of the real’” as the postmodernist work tends to mix the literary genres (Barry 87). Also, this paper focuses on the intertextual elements such as parody, pastiche, and allusion used in the novel.

A Coalesce of Mythology and History: Textual Analysis

Tharoor in *The Great Indian Novel* incorporates and reinterprets the basic story of the *Mahabharata* to sing the twentieth-century political history of modern India. He presents a satirical characterisation of mythological figures and strips them of their original aura. For instance, Ved Vyasa is “the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a travelling sage” (Tharoor 6). On the contrary, the epic portrays them as superhuman beings who have had divine authority.

Unlike the *Mahabharata*, the novel is about a conflict between two civilisations. Nevertheless, the theme has the same sound. Both texts are about the struggle for power where the deprived section claims rightful ownership over the throne. Tharoor extends

the story of the novel to depict the emergency period during the reign of Indira Gandhi when the Indian democracy was endangered by her eccentric actions. On the structural level, the novel imitates the epic framework of the *Mahabharata*. Tharoor claims, “I decided to use the great epic as the framework for a satirical reworking of the major Indian political events of this century, from the days of British colonial rule to the struggle for freedom and the triumphs and disappointments of Independence” (Tharoor xvii). The narration seems as if characters walk out of mythology to appear in history. Tharoor contextualises the characters from the *Mahabharata* in the postcolonial setting. He presents fragments of mythology and history to narrate the story of the freedom struggle and its aftereffects by intermixing the events and identities. Tharoor claims in the “afterword” of the novel that “Many of the characters, incidents and issues in the novel are based on the people and events described in the epic the *Mahabharata*, a work which remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions to India” (609).

This novel is a deconstructive presentation of mythological characters in which the original is parodied for humour’s sake. The amanuensis Ganapathi (reminding Lord Ganesha) is described as a South Indian “with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes. Through which he is staring owlishly at me as I dictate these words” (Tharoor 5). Tharoor does so because he believes in the postmodernist notion of unfixed identity as he asserts: “There is nothing restrictive and self-limiting about Indian identity it reasserts: it is large, eclectic and flexible, containing multitudes” (xxiv). He believes identity to be the by-product of social and cultural discourses. Identity is something that can be made. It is the habit of the postmodernist writers to reconstruct historical identities and events.

The story of the novel begins with the presentation of Ved Vyas who is initialized as V. V. In the very beginning, the readers are aware that it is the retelling of the event when Vyas requested Bhagwan Ganesha to write the story of the *Mahabharata*. V.V. introduces himself as a bastard “born with the century” (Tharoor 6). The satirical tone is apparent in the narrator’s description of himself as “a bastard in a fine tradition”. He reminds the historical figure of C. Rajagopalachari who was closely associated with Gandhiji. In the epic, Ved Vyasa was the half-elder brother of Bhishma. Here, in the novel, Ved Vyasa and Bhishma are juxtaposed respectively to Rajgopalachari and Gandhiji. Mythological and historical figures are brought together as they represent similar attributes and visions.

Incorporated characters and events from the epic and history are portrayed not as they are but with some distortion. Dr. Venkateson writes that history is not replaced with myth in the text, although, the plot of the epic is used as the framework that moulds the structure of the novel. To contextualise, the author “alters the mythological essence of the epic by representing historical personages from Indian history with human attributes” (464). In short, Tharoor provides an alternative reality for the both. By adopting the postmodern narrative technique, he questions the very validity of the mythological history of ancient India and the political history of modern India. Tharoor uses, as Baidehi Mukherjee writes, “myth and history interchangeably to decode each other, which is to be interpreted as a typical postmodern rejection of absolute truths and grand-narratives” (65).

The novel presents a postmodern narrative of the epic. Postmodernism rejects the idea of centrality and fixity. It believes reality is constituted through the forms of representation and the way characters and

events are represented in the story becomes the fact. As per Lyotard “all forms of representation rely upon narrative in order to validate themselves, and it could be said that all knowledge is primarily narrative as, no matter their medium, all artistic and cultural representations requires some metanarrative to explain, validate or justify them”(qtd. in Crews 19).The flexibility of the narrative is seen while deliberation on the name of the narrator in the novel: “Imagine, a name like that for the son of a wandering Brahmin in British India. No, Ved Vyas is much easier” (Tharoor 9). Here the character and event of the epic becomes the fact of history.

Introducing characters from the *Mahabharata* with the traits of freedom fighters foregrounds the metafictional nature of the novel. The term ‘metafiction’ was coined by William H. Grass to refer to the type of fiction which draws attention towards its fictionality. According to Waugh, “metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality” (qtd. in Abootalebi 71). Ved Vyas, the author of the *Mahabharata*, has been portrayed in the novel as the storyteller who is also part of that very story. He narrates his family story as historical facts. He uses an interactive method to narrate the story. While narration he interferes with the flow of the story and passes comments on the events and interacts with Ganapathi when he finds his expressions doubtful: Yes, yes, put it all down. Every word I say. We’re not writing a piddling Western thriller here. This is my story, the story of Ved Vyas, eighty-eight years old and full of irrelevancies, but it could become nothing less than the Great Indian Novel” (Tharoor 6).

The fragmented use of mythological and historical facts at the same time questions the factuality of the events. Tharoor, a true

postmodernist, attracts the reader's attention towards the unreliability of both history and mythology. The rational presentation of story in the novel enquires about both mythological and historical phenomena; therefore, Tharoor doubts the validity of truths proclaimed by previous authors. In the novel, he not only questions the events and issues but the outlook of the characters towards the future. For example, the irrational idealism of Ganga Dutta darkened the future of Hastinapur the moment he declared, "I hereby vow, in terms that no one before me has ever equalled and no one after me will ever match, that if you let your daughter marry my father, her son shall succeed as king" (Tharoor 13). Similarly, Gandhiji's idealism is responsible, somewhere, for the partition of India. Here, the irony is that they had good intentions behind their actions, but the consequences were unexpected.

The affinity between myth and history categorises the work as a historical metafiction. The characters portrayed in the epic resonate with the historical facts of the past; however, the author takes literary liberty while recreating them. Linda Hutcheon believes postmodern fiction to be "interrogative and instructive rather than a reactionary cultural production" (qtd. in Woods 69). Woods further notes, calling it "historiographic metafiction" she describes postmodern fiction as "a mode which consciously problematises the making of fiction and history. Postmodern fiction reveals the past as always ideologically and discursively constructed. It is a fiction which is directed both inward and outward, concerned both with its status as fiction, narrative or language, and also grounded in some verifiable historical reality" (Woods 70).

The intertextual element of the novel is visible in its inclusion of the characters and events from the *Mahabharata* and other texts. The method of intertextuality integrates two or more texts to enrich

and enhance the effectiveness of work. Tharoor admits that "No name in the book, not even of a minor character or place, is casually chosen: each is derived either from the epic itself . . . or from writings" by authors such as Foster, Kipling, Paul Scott, Rushdie, etcetera (xx). The novel is constant reminder of the text of mythology and history. One scholar writes that "The events in the novel are narrated and analyzed from the point of view of other texts. The device is used to underscore the composite and multi-layered framework of modern Indian society" (Haider 79). Tharoor not only includes allusions to the ancient and modern Indian myths but also metaphors and references from other fictional texts to describe the "Indo-British encounter" (xix).

The technique of temporal distortion is used by the author to merge the story of two different timelines. There is no clear-cut demarcation of the time sequence of the narrative. Using a nonlinear timeline the narrator moves forwards and backwards in time. Also, the novel covers a vast timeline from the birth of Vyasa to the political crisis in modern India during emergency. Besides that, the use of pastiche provides the author with a chance to combine the multiple elements from the epic and history. As a literary technique, pastiche emulates the elements and style of previous genres. The novel consists of eighteen chapters reminding the structure of the *Mahabharata* which is narrated in eighteen books. The writing style of the novel includes both prose and poetry.

Conclusion

The Great Indian Novel can be recognised as a 'mock epic' in prose. The thematic foundation of the novel is the fight for decolonisation and the struggle against the dictatorship. The epic framework of the *Mahabharata* is used to convey the modern political history of India. Therefore, in this sense, the

novel is a postcolonial version of the *Mahabharata*. The simultaneous study of mythology and history makes the novel paradoxical. Since the author does a postmodern reading of the epic to portray the story with a critical outlook, this writing should be described as 'reader's writing'. In the novel, the author depicts divine incidents with logical probability. The mythological characters connote historical personalities. Tharoor adopts a scientific approach to study mythology which is full of inexplicable events. Contrary to the epic, the characters of the novel display human attributes. By reading two timelines at the same time, Tharoor blurs the distance between fact and fiction. He uses mythology to fictionalise the twentieth-century history of India. The characters and places borrowed from the epic foreground the fictionality of the novel. The title of the novel suggests that the author wishes his work to mirror 20th-century India in the same way the *Mahabharata* presents a social history of ancient India. Through the novel, Shashi Tharoor attempts to recreate the story of the epic in a postmodern context.

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