

Social-Political Orientation and Reflection of Indian Culture in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel

Dr. Amit Kumar
Dept. of English,
C.C.S University ,Meerut
(India)

Abstract:

The paper is about social-political orientation and reflection of Indian culture in Shashi Tharoor's The Great India Novel. It is a fictional work that takes the story of the Mahabharata, the epic of Hindu mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence Movement and the first three decades post-independence. Figures from Indian history are transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian independence and subsequent history, up through the 1980s. Character of novel is orientation of Indian political personality like C.R. Bhishma is correlated to Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhari of Mahabharata is blind-folded whereas Kamala is invalid. Dhritarashtra, is India's first Prime Minister, Nehru; while the chaste Kaurava pater familias Bhishma, generally referred to Gangaji, is Gandhi. But rather than a hundred sons, Tharoor's Dhritarashtra fathers a single daughter, Priya Duryodhani -the oldest Kaurava in the Mahabharata is called Duryodhana-, hailed as the future ruler of all India: an obvious reference to Indira Gandhi. Shishupal is correlated to Lal Bahadur sastry. Draupadi, who represents the "body politic", or Indian democracy and wilts visibly with the imposition of Duryodhani's "siege" -a reference to Indira Gandhi's State of Emergency from 1975 to 1977. Yudhistir is correlated to Morarji Desai. Tharoor says that in writing of Indian culture, he is very deeply conscious of his own subjectivity; arguably, there is more than one culture and certainly more than one view of Indian culture. The culture of every country determines the food, cloth, music, likes and dislikes and every aspect of a man's life. Despite one's education and social contact his traits of culture come to the fore at the time of crisis. Tharoor is widely acknowledged as an experimental novelist. Novelty is the watch-word in his works.

Key words: The Great India Novel, Social-Political Orientation, Mahabharata, Indian Culture, Independence

Shashi Tharoor (born 9 March 1956) is an Indian politician and writer who has been twice elected Member of Parliament (Lok Sabha) from Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala. He was previously Minister of State in the Government of India for External Affairs (2009–2010) and Human Resource Development (2012–2014). Tharoor is also a well-known award-winning writer, having authored 15 bestselling works of fiction and non-fiction since 1981, all of which are centered on India and its history, culture, film, politics, society, foreign policy, and more. He is also the author of hundreds of columns and articles in publications such as the New York Times, Washington Post, TIME, Newsweek, and The Times of India.

The Great Indian Novel (1989), most virtuoso reworking of an epic model -in this case, the Mahabharata- yet produced in English. On the basis of brief analysis of the novel, an attempt is made to position the author in Social and political terms. Tharoor's personal standpoint is, however, more explicit than most contemporary writers'. A social- political orientation is clearly articulated in this novel. The Great Indian Novel published is a political satire which interprets The Mahabharata as India's modern history. This novel uses the theme of great Hindu epic, the epic of Hindu mythology. All the characters are recast and reset in the context of the Indian Independence Movement and first three decades of post independence. Figures from Indian history are transformed into characters from mythology and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian Independence.

The Mahabharata is an epic tale describing the historical dynastic struggle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the heirs of the king Shantanu. In this novel, Tharoor recasts the story of the nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related by their personal and political histories. Through his cantankerous narrator, Tharoor takes an irreverent tone towards figures such as Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who are ordinarily treated with reverence by Indians. The phrase "Great Indian novel" is an allusion to the long-standing idea of the "Great American Novel" and is also a pun, roughly translating "Mahabharata" (maha "great"; Bharata "India"). The Mahabharata, which is not a novel but an epic poem, can be understood,

according to Tharoor, to represent Hinduism's greatest literary achievement and thus serves as an appropriate paradigm in which to frame a retelling of recent Indian history. A significant characteristic of Tharoor's version of the story is the emphasis on the older generations (e.g., Bhishma, Dhritarashtra, and Pandu) and the resulting de-emphasis on the actions of the Kauravas and the Pandavas.

The principal character of this novel is none other than Ved Vyas who asks Brahm, the creator to provide him with an assistant to write whatever he recites. Then Brahm selects Ganapathi with 'elephantine' head', 'broad forehead', 'enormous trunk', 'shrewd', 'intelligent eyes' and is said to be a South Indian'. He starts writing the epic for Vyasa. One of the subtlest touches of *The Great Indian Novel*, however, is Tharoor's choice of narrator, Ved Vyas with his amanuensis Ganapathi. According to tradition, the Mahabharata was compiled by the Sanskrit poet Vyasa, who dictated it to the scribe Ganapathi, another name for the "elephant god" Ganesh, at the suggestion of Brahma himself. Those unfamiliar with Sanskrit normally read the epic in one of its many modern "transcreations", with Tharoor acknowledging a debt to the English versions of P. Lal and C.R. Rajagopalachari. But the real-life Chakravarti Rajagopalachari, known popularly as "C.R.", as a close associate of Gandhi's and one of modern India's greatest statesmen was intimately involved with events described in the novel. Tharoor's Ganapathi is a Southern Indian like C.R. and, incidentally, like Tharoor himself, whose family hail from Kerala; and even more significantly, the fictional Ved Vyas emulates the historical C.R. by becoming the first Indian governor-general of India. Tharoor thus cleverly conflates poet and redactor, ironically authenticating his otherwise fantastic narrative by placing this composite figure at its very centre. The ability to detect literary parallels in the novel is ultimately determined by one's knowledge of the Mahabharata and familiarity with modern Indian history.

The Britishers are introduced into the story to give an impression that the entire story happens in colonized India. At first Satyawati's marriage is put to trial by the British and later with the modest appeal of Ganga Datta, which is approved by the British Government. It is here that Bhishma is correlated to Mahatma Gandhi. The superimposition of the political event of the twentieth century on the basic structure of The Mahabharata is made plausible by variation in stylistic levels and tones. The Transformation of the ancient myth into contemporary politics seems to have been more successful than the transformation of contemporary politics into some

kind of myth or other. But the Gangaji-Gandhiji identification seems to break down at crucial stages in the narrative. After failing in his ‘Grihastha Dharma’, Gangaji starts transforming himself into a sage, an impersonal, man of action. The transformation of the ‘man’ into ‘humane’ can be clearly witnessed through the words of Churchill:

*“Problem is, he is now going further. Preaching a
Lot of damn nonsense about equality and justice
And what have you. And you tell me he cleans
His own toilet, instead of letting his damn bhisti Do it”.*

Gangaji tries to eradicate class distinction. To some extent he even questions the ‘varna dharma’. Britishers look down upon Hindustan & Hindustani, commenting on the peculiarities of genders in Hindustani.

*“I mean is there any good reason why a table
Should be feminine and a bed masculine? D’you
Think it has to do with what you do on them?”*

Gangaji starts threatening the Britishers by talking about ‘Swaraj’ ‘Self rule’ and ‘pan-Indian nationalism’. After the 1857 revolt or ‘mutiny there is an optimistic lead, when Queen Victoria had thrown the doors of the ICS open to natives. The novelist brands this as an administrative alloy, i.e, ICS. Vidur is the ICS officer.

Tharoor transpose elements of the Mahabharata to modern Indian history, that it may be more useful to consider the significant differences between the novel and its epic original, rather than the many similarities? Tharoor’s Kauravas thus represent India’s Congress Party; the blind patriarch, Dhritarashtra, is India’s first Prime Minister, Nehru; while the chaste Kaurava pater familias Bhishma, generally referred to Gangaji, is Gandhi. But rather than a hundred sons, Tharoor’s Dhritarashtra fathers a single daughter, Priya Duryodhani -the oldest Kaurava in the Mahabharata is called Duryodhana-, hailed as the future ruler of all India: an obvious reference to Indira Gandhi. Another elaboration of the epic original concerns the five Pandavas themselves, as Tharoor moves to more direct allegory: Yudishtir thus symbolizes India’s best political traditions, Bhim its loyal armed forces, Arjun an articulate press, Nakul and Sahadev the administrative and diplomatic services, respectively. All five Pandavas are also devoted to their common wife, Draupadi, who represents the “body politic”, or Indian democracy and wilts visibly with the imposition of Duryodhani’s “siege” -a reference to Indira Gandhi’s State of Emergency from 1975 to 1977. Pandu, the non-biological father of the Pandavas, thus

becomes Subash Bose, founder of the pro-Japanese Indian National Army; Karna, Kunti Devi's child by the sun, becomes Muhammad Ali Jinnah, first president of Pakistan, etc.

Kunti's five sons are kept under the controlled instruction of Guru Jayaprakash Drona. Jaya prakash Drona is correlated to Jayaprakash Narayana. Through the words of Drona, the writer proves the greatness of Indian culture and traditions:

*“While some of our historical-scientific claims
(To have discovered the secret of nuclear fission
In the fourth century A.D., for instance) are justly
Challenged by western scholars, no one questions
In fact that our ancestors were the first to
Conceive of the zero. Before that mathematicians,
From Arabs to the Chinese, left a blank space in
Their calculations, it too Indians to realize that
even nothing can be something”.*

Priya Duryodhani in Mahabharata has a little role to play whereas in The Great Indian Novel she is given utmost importance. She is successful in fulfilling her 'Dharma' towards her parents. She looks after her mother till her death and accepts and follows her father's teachings, which he had taught her through letters. She is a self made woman, with firm conviction, time and again the novelist returns to the character of Gangaji.

Finally at the end Viscount Drewpad summons up the representatives of the three parties, kauravas, Sikhs and Muslim group and announces that the British Government is ready to transfer the power to the Indian self-Government but he asks them to resolve the conflicts between the groups and come as one before 15 Aug., 1947. Karnistan is finally divided from Indian province in the maps by the Geographers.

Meanwhile Dhritarashtra who is active in politics and has also become a close acquaintance of Drewpad, falls into an affair with Lady Drewpad. Even after Dewpad leaves India on 26 Jan., 1950, his wife periodically visits Dhritarashtra which results in a pre-mature baby named Draupadi Mokراسي (a personification of India). After independence vidur, the principal secretary for integration, moves on to Devpur the capital of Manimir and meets the Maharaja at an odd hour to convince him in order to sign the instrument, the first kaurava-karnistan war begins. Dhritarashtra along with priya is successful in bringing about a modern Industrial revolution. After Dhritarashtra there is no man of truly national stature to succeed Dhritarashtra; the karauva party decides to have a collective leadership, with the working committee effectively in

command. They selected Shishupal as the Prime Minister. Later, Priya Duryadhani is given a chance to become the P.M. because she was only a woman and she would decorate the office, so that the kaurava working committee can act accordingly. Dhritarashtra along with priya is successful in bringing about a modern Industrial revolution. .After Dhritarashtra there is no man of truly national stature to succeed Dhritarashtra; the kaurava party decides to have a collective leadership, with the working committee effectively in command. They selected Shishupal (Lal Bahdur sastry) as the Prime Minister. Later, Priya Duryadhani is given a chance to become the P.M. because she was only a woman and she would decorate the office, so that the kaurava working committee can act accordingly. The phrase ‘only a woman’ shows us the stature of woman in the post-independence India, particularly in the area of Indian politics.

The Pandavas start gaining importance in the Indian politics. In this context, Draupathi Mokراسي represents the Indian independence and the pandavas are entrusted to be its protectors. Arjun moves from Delhi to Kerala where he meets D.Krishna Parthasarathi who becomes his friend and promises to be his adviser later on. Priya’s reign is aptly named as “the reign of error” because it has destroyed the unity and morality of the Kaurava party. In its fourth general elections, the Kaurava party loses seats all over the country, but retains its power. So Yudhistir questions the leadership of Priya, and so he is appointed as the Deputy P.M. He is functioning as the chief executive. He also presides over the cabinet like the chairman of the Board. Priya ignores Yudhistir which leads him to resign. Yudhistir is correlated to Morarji Desai. She appeals to all “Progressive” and “like –minded” people outside the kaurava party to join her efforts. The first one to react to her call is Ashwathama who fights against privy purses to Ex. Maharajas and proposes the issue of nationalization of banks which is readily accepted by the Prime-Minister. The bill is passed.

In his novel, Jarasandha may be taken as a personification of East and West Karnistans, which are both inhabited by Muslims but are totally separated by the Indian army with Bhim as a soldier, Arjun as a spy and Krishna as the thinker. Now Draupadi is shown to have moments of good health. Tharoor’s title ‘The reign of error’ is quite apt for the rule of priya. Dharma even in The Mahabharata seems to mean differently at different times. Impendency rather than stable ethics seems to have been practiced even by Krishna before, during and after the Great War. The

raja dharma as it is known and practiced by the kings is to preserve safe guard and perpetuate their power.

Drona emerges from his retreat and calls for a peoples uprising against Priya. Arjun ignores politics and takes to non-political freelance journalism. Nakul takes over Vidur's post in Nationals service. Sahadev enters the Foreign Service. Drona preaches new civil disobedience against the rule of the prime minister. In Drona's home state the chief minister resigns and the "presidents rule" is imposed. Prime minister is advised by a Bengali lawer shakuni shanker Dey to arrest and imprison the agitators. Yudhistir starts working actively with Drona for Janata Morcha or people's front. The siege is accompanied by the declaration of a twenty point socio-economic programme which the government seems determined to implement. This shows the mind of the Indians and illustrates both their resilience and their self-absorption in the circumstance.

Suddenly Priya suspends the siege and calls for free general elections. She is vey confident that she would sweep the polls. The novelist makes fun of the elections as 'the great Indian thamasha' which is conducted at irregular intervals and various levels amid much fanfare. As usual ballot –boxes are stuffed, booths are captured, and the election, candidates, workers and voters are assaulted, kidnapped and at times shot. But nothing stops the franchise. People feel that they have got a chance to choose in a free election, between 'democracy' and dictatorship' and also between 'dharma' and 'adharm'. It is like the great battle of kurukshetra; the only difference is that in the end it becomes a tragedy. But this war is devoid of bloodshed. It is between good and evil. Various opposition factions get together in a people's front. At last the results are announced and priya is defeated by the Janatha Front. Yudhistir is elected as the prime minister by janatha front. Now Draupadi is quite healthy and her skin is glowing with honour.

At the last Tharoor talks extensively of dharma. It is a unique and untranslatable Sanskrit term. He says:

*“India, the land where truth and honour, valour
And dharma were worshiped as the cardinal
Principles of existence, is now a nation of weak-
Willed compromisers, of leaders unable to lead,*

of rampant corruption and endemic faithlessness.

It is now a land where dharma and duty have

Come to mean nothing”.

In order to be true to himself the author admits that he portrays a nation in struggle both against external and internal forces. The novelist may seem to be a pessimist when he calls India a land of adulteration, black marketing, corruption, communal strife, and dowry killings. But his being realistic is depicting life in its raw terms. Tharoor emphasizes the view that not the efforts of Gangaji could get us freedom but that the affair of Dhritharashtra with Lady Drewpad achieves it. Therefore the insignificance of Gangaji's sacrifice is complete. It is not dharma that bought India its independence but kama, the third of the purusharthas.

CONCLUSION

The present work has the artistic and critical taste to show Indian culture in writing novels. It helps the students to get knowledge regarding the inspiring and motivating history of India. It also shows Shashi Tharoor's learnedness as a novelist by deriving his extraordinary qualities and characteristics as well as the use of Indian aspects in writing novels. It's an innovative attempt to find out social-political orientation from different angles like theme, characters, use of Indian history, culture, use of myths, way of narration and techniques in writing novel. The writer always speaks through a character in his novels, but he never uses the first person narrative voice. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the author speaks through Ved Vyasa, who remains almost as a spectator or commentator. The Zigzag narrative, constantly shifting from the present to the past, from reality to illusion, discovers and defines, enlarges and evaluates the central theme of the novel. On the whole Shashi Tharoor shows his Socio-Moral vision and mourns for the lack of 'Dharma' in modern times. Shashi Tharoor himself said in one of the interviews, "India has changed and keeps on changing, so any answers I give you today will be out of date in a year or two."

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