

# Great indian novel is an attempt english literature essay

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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 mediated. 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 trans-plantation 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 more overtly that:

**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. With the help of imagination and inventive modifications, 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 Tarkish cigarettes, wearing her Banarasi Saree, Bombay nails, Bangalore sandals and Barailly bangles which advertised her fabled elegance." (p. 265) This type of mind with much liberty as a symbol of certain values is not always justifiable. The author does not fail to seek parallel for Krishna. His Krishna is a local party secretary, D. Krishna Parthsarthy. Apart from that, 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. This caricature of typical Indian stereotypes makes Tharoor to realize his indebted feeling for India and to project them in an Indo-nostalgic mode. Shri. Aurobindo (1980: 284) has hailed this 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.**

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 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, Chaudhary 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 owlily..." (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." (He misuses native words like jamadar (sweeper) for bhisti (a water carrier) and a bhisti (a person) for a lota (a small water pot). 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 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):

**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, 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 Vyas justifies this argument.

**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.

**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 and to his ' epic' for between the last and the first lines he

has unfurled 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 or a chaotic figure 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 colonisers and tries to break the hegemony of the oppressors. To emphasise his yearning for rich Indian past, further 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 politically and ultimately historically more conscious to echo his concerns. He, like his

counterparts, 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 (College English Review, 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.**

**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 is 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." Tharoor himself (1990: 5) puts the literary worth of the Mahabharata:

**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 Vyas, 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.

**Dharme charthe ch kame mokshe ch Bharatrshabh****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)**

This 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 literary foundations like the Mahabharata, making 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. 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 Vyas is a typical Indo-nostalgic narrator who narrates the story to south Indian intelligent Ganapathi, who put forth a condition that, the narrative should not be broken. In reply, his Ved Vyas 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. Tharoor's rejection of colonial version does not silence the possibilities of other Indian voices. In one of the interviews, he (College English Review, 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 tour de force 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 of the 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:

**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. Satyawati, 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." (Ibid)**

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 and 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 and 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, the great divide which is brought about by the machinations of Priya Duryodhani, who is none else but Indira Gandhi. 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 ordinary 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 used the resources of fiction for providing their vision of the past, in which they either chose 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 which inform its recreations 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 aimed 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. Iravati Karve (Yuganta, 1969: 17) highlighting the feature, has rightly stressed that:

**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, provided 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 chose several forms of diverse literary styles such as pun, wordplay, light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, playful stories, and witty digressions. In this regard Tharoor (Myth, History and Fiction, 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 (*Yoking of Myth to History*, 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. It absolutely contests the imperialist colonial historiography and some forms of Indo-nostalgia. 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 Vyas and then moves on the King Shantanu, his affair with Satyawati, 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 Lakshagaha, 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 in 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 gained influence in the party hierarchy and succeeded in controlling the reins of power in 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 knew 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. In making Pandavas into an assorted group, Tharoor might be held guilty



of a confusion of categories. For mixing human beings with institutions Tharoor observes some similitude with the original. Since Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi dominated the political scene in 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 Jayaprakash 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 delightful mix 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, provide Tharoor 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, in which hundreds and thousands of people nameless and faceless, get left out. 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 what 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 (Yoking of Myth to History, 1990: 6) asserts that:

**The tone and tenor of my version of India's history is shaped by his consciousness of the historiographic contest is borne by the fact that it makes reference to earlier accounts, hagiographies as he calls them.**

His main 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 is he 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 is both a source of strength and weakness of its 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." 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)**

### **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.

### **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 as:



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

His Nehru's account 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 bungled 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 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 centralized and cumbersome machinery of parliamentary democracy proved ineffective because parliament passed laws that a few implemented and many ignored. Tharoor's main 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)**