

## Social and Political Ideology in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel



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### Abstract

Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) is an astonishing title derived from the ancient epic *The Mahabharata*. In Sanskrit, 'Maha' means 'great' and 'Bharata' means 'India'. *The Great Indian Novel* is modern English Prose novel Whereas Ved Vyasa's *Mahabharata* is an epic poem in Sanskrit. Tharoor 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. The writer 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 Vyas'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 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 Bahdur 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.

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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. Ekalavya is correlated to V.V.Giri. Jaya prakash Drona is correlated to Jayaprakash Narayana. Karna, Kunti Devi's child by the sun, becomes Muhammad Ali Jinnah, first president of Pakistan, etc. There are, however, countless other literary allusions, such as those to Paul Scott's novels of the Raj.

**Key words:** The Great Indian Novel, The Mahabharata, Kaurava, allusion, Emergency

## **INTRODUCTION**

Shashi Tharoor is remarkable for a sequence of the fiction which subverts a number of paradigms commonly linked with postcolonial writing or the New Literatures in English, even as they transcend the boundaries of the classic realist novel. His first work, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), while owing a literary debt to Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, may also be the 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 and political ideology is clearly articulated in this novel. It is Much of the present essay is, in fact, concerned with positioning of Shashi Tharoor: the ambivalence between the active and passive senses of the term is intentional, since Tharoor is not only to be classified in literary terms, but must be read for his personal position or agenda which is often revealed with And with regard to what is usually placed on the credit side.

The protagonist 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.

Ganga leaves his son, Ganga Datta abruptly and fails in her 'dharma' towards her son. Shathanu got married with Satyavathi when Ganga datta takes a vow of celibacy thereby facilitating his father to marry again. From then onwards Ganga Datta is named 'Bhishma' though his father has failed in his parental dharma, Bhishma performs his filial duty by choosing to remain a life long celibate.

The Britishers are introduced into the story to give an impression that the entire story happens in colonized India. At first Satyavati'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. Hence K. Ayyappa Paniker says

*"It is rasabhasa rather than pure rasa that dominates. This makes the work a mock-epic as was intended by Tharoor"*

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.

Gandhari and Dhritarashtra give birth to a daughter Priya Duryodhani who grows up to rule all India. Gandhari fails in her dharma towards her husband as well as to her daughter. Gandhari of Mahabharata is blind-folded whereas Kamala is invalid.

So faithfully does 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 pattern families Bhishma, generally referred to as 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: Yudhishtir thus symbolizes India’s best political traditions, Bhishma 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.

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.

Meanwhile, 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”.*

At last 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 Mokradi (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 kaurava 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.

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The diplomatic nature of the politicians is better expressed through the burning of the lac house which is referred to as “Trojan house” by the same Prime Minister, who expresses her sorrow later.

The Pandavas start gaining importance in the Indian politics. In this context, Draupathi Mokras 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 Mahabharata, Aswathama always remains subservient to Drona. Whereas in The Great Indian Novel Aswathama acts as an individual entity in politics. When Drona represents the janata party, he worked with congress.

The President who is a Muslim, sign the bill and makes an act. By now Draupadi is lawfully ill. Tharoor’s comparison of the political giant to Frankenstein’s monster is quite apt and logical. Like Shelley’s Frankenstein who is a creation who tries to devour the creator, priya’s rise is abominable.

When a candidate is nominated by the kaurava working committee for the presidency, priya supports an independent candidate called Ekalavya.

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 lawyer 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.

The life of the poor has become miserable. They are subject to random police harassment. They are forced displacement from their homes in the name of slum clearance campaigns. They are all forced to compulsory vasectomies in pursuance of population control.

Suddenly Priya suspends the siege and calls for free general elections. She is very 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 'adharma'. 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.



*“If you begin an examination by avoiding the most  
Difficult question it raised it is that very question  
That will eventually guarantee your failure”.*

Yudhistir is elected as the prime minister by janatha front. Now Draupadi is quite healthy and her skin is glowing with honour.

The new prime minister is ‘stiff, straight backed and humourless and drinks his own urine’. He also gives speeches for the upliftment of the backward strata of the society. Priya is preparing plots against the Government, Drona, is a flawed Mahaguru, because his goodness is not balanced by shrewdness. A majority of the Fronts M.P’s back-stop the prime minister and the Government finally falls.

In the closing chapter of this novel, 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.

Thus the ‘self-irony’ and ‘self-mockery’ on the part of Vyasa-Tharoor in a way provides an indirect justification for all the liberties the author has taken with the plots and characters of the Mahabharata. The penetration of the past and the present is accepted by the readers.



In the ‘After word’ supplied by the writer, we see that he is quite aware of the damage he has tried to avoid. He says:

“While some scenes in The Great Indian Novel are recasting of situations described in translations of the Mahabharata, I have taken far too many liberties with the epic to associate any of its Translations with my sins”.

Yudhister’s encounter with dharma reminds us of the fatal flaws which lead India to collapse. The flaws are as follows: Basically, people are willing to serve institutions rather than values. They do their job but forget about the larger duty to greater cause. They also know what is right but do nothing with their knowledge. The leaders are arrogant and believe themselves to be perfect. They are selfish; they look after themselves rather than their country as whole. India needs people who are true to themselves and to dharma to prosper. Dharma plays a unique role in Tharoor novels. His note of dharma is marvelous and gets us closer to the real core of dharma. The same idea about dharma, “From dharma comes success” is expressed and revealed in the novel.

In this novel Shashi Tharoor shows India’s transformation from dharma to adharma and from nobility to brutality. But he fails to give measures to restore its past glory.

## **CONCLUSION**

The most important theme concerned in The Great Indian Novel is ‘Dharma’. Thus to some extent The Great Indian Novel can be compared to Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children which deals determinedly with the ‘Emergency’. The writer is skilful in mingling politics, mythology, culture and tradition.

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.

The novelist proves himself successful in merging the earlier themes of public issues like the achievement of political freedom and more recent phase of writing where the problem of what is means to be an authentic human being.

In this novel, the novelist explains the concept of 'Dharma' in terms of 'Duty' to be performed by different persons. He also shows how 'Dharma' varies with the persons and their occupations. But still it is the only yardstick with which the purposefulness of human life on earth is measured.

On the whole Shashi Tharoor shows his Socio-Moral vision and mourns for the lack of 'Dharma' in modern times. The satirical and sarcastic tone in both the novels is an indication of the author's concern for lack of values on the part of the characters. In a society with the 'transvaluation of values', a rigid, inflexible values system is an anachronism. So though The Mahabharata frame work has been chosen by Tharoor for this contemporary situation, the reduction of dharma is portrayed in all its multifarious revisions.

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