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**Indian English Literature
An Anthology of Critical Reflections**

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Revisiting Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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ABSTRACT

The Great Indian Novel continues to be meta fiction, that is a piece of creation based on already written work and Tharoor has successfully retold the thousands of years old tale in modern terms, revisiting and recasting the historical and mythological episodes of India. The novel is a fine blend and an amazing admixture of both historical and mythological perspectives. The present paper is attempted to give myth and history in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*.

Keywords: Myth, history, epic, novel

The Great Indian Novel challenges modern Indian independence myths and the democratic narrative. Multiple interpretations of reality are observed in various narratives. Tharoor's brilliance is in demonstrating how the great epic's technique may be used to reenact the present Indian political system. This implies that history and literature are intertwined processes. To identify historical characters like Gandhi, Nehru, and Jinnah with their legendary equivalents, Tharoor combines the creativity of fiction with the scholarship of real truth.

The Great Indian Novel owes its title from the epic, the Mahabharata, which means 'Great India'. The choice of the title 'The Great Indian Novel' appears to be translation, and the Sanskrit terms, 'Maha' means 'Great' and 'Indian' meaning 'Bharata'. Tharoor's experiment in recasting the age old tale in modern terms has been interesting. *The Great Indian Novel* continues to be meta fiction, that is a piece of creation based on already written work and Tharoor has successfully retold the thousands of years old tale in modern terms, revisiting and recasting the historical and mythological episodes of India. The novel is a fine blend and an amazing admixture of both historical and mythological perspectives. Every incident and character of the novel appears to be commonplace, realistic, true to life, has reference to the epic and the significance of Mahabharata lies in exercising such a profound impact in our lives. P. Lal brings out the importance of Mahabharata thus:

The epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece out there, somewhere in the past, or tucked away in air-conditioned museums and libraries. Its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its lengths and myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination, its events are the disturbing warp and woof of our age...The essential *Mahabharata* is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the 20 century; whatever helps us understand and live better our own Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha (faith, wealth, pleasure and salvation)...No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself, if it does not have meaning for us now, it is nothing, it is dead. (Lal qt in *Great* xii).

The Hindu religious epic works, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata have been noted, popular and quite common names in every household which have been a constant source of inspiration,

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resourcefulness and motivation. Even children learn a lot from the tales of these two texts from their mothers and grandparents as bedtime stories. The morality that the tender hearts inculcate right from their early life is drawn largely from the classics. The epic of the Mahabharata has been a source of inspiration for a number of writers both in India and abroad.

Tharoor touched all the aspects of the politico-historical aspects beginning from the period of the British reign, the pre-independence period, the Indian freedom struggle and the partition. He makes a passing remark throwing light on a comparative analysis of both the works. He admits both negative and positive strains of his attempts/efforts at past and present and the impact of one on the other. He like many other literary figures was influenced by the epic, the Mahabharata that it is unimaginable to think of Indian life, and culture without it.

The Mahabharata has had so many accretions over the years in constant retellings that there is practically no subject it does not cover. Its characters and personages still march triumphantly in Indian minds, its myths and legends still inspire the Indian imagination, its events still speak to Indians with a contemporary resonance rare in many twentieth-century works (xii)

Since the significance of the epic remains unparalleled, Tharoor explains the purpose of basing his work on the epic:

I decided to use the great epic as the framework for a satirical reworking of the major Indian political events of this century from the days of British colonial rule to the struggle for freedom and the triumphs and disappointments of independence. (xvi)

Tharoor acknowledges the source, the great epic, and also admits that he was not a Sanskrit scholar.

Many of the characters, incidents and issues in the novel are based on 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. I am no Sanskrit scholar and have therefore relied only on a highly subjective reading of a variety of English translations of the epic. (419)

He also expresses his indebtedness to the English versions of the epic:

I should like to acknowledge, in particular, my debt to the versions of C. Rajagopalachari and P. Lal, respectively the most readable renderings of what scholars call the southern and the northern recensions of the work. (419)

Sudhendu Shekhar comments on Tharoor's use of the Mahabharata as a source for portraying the contemporary socio-political situations in India.

The Great Indian Novel is the *Mahabharata* recounted because Tharoor does not fashion life, independent of the past patterns and uses myth elaborately to function as the prototype. In a marked improvement upon Rushdie's craft, he sustains the endemic habitual past through the reciprocal present unlike what Rushdie and others suppose *ab initio* or the here-and-now perceived. This indulgent use of myth only naturally releases us from the continuum of the present for introspection and evaluation. (126)

Prof. Lal, the trans-creator of the epic, the Mahabharata makes interesting comments: "The epic of Vyasa is not a literary masterpiece out there, somewhere in the past, or tucked away in air conditioned museums and libraries," he avers....its characters still walk the Indian streets, its animals populate our forests, its legends and myths haunt and inspire the Indian imagination, its events are the disturbing

warp and woof of our age...The essential Mahabharata is whatever is relevant to us in the second half of the 20th Century; whatever helps us understand and live better our own Dharma, Artha, Kama and Moksha (faith, wealth, pleasure and salvation) ...No epic, no work of art, is sacred by itself; if it does not have meaning for me now, it is nothing, it is dead" (Timeless Epic 3)

Tharoor employs *Mahabharata* narrative frame to represent modern India. M.F. Salat writes regarding Tharoor's use of Mahabharata as narrative strategy, "It enables Tharoor to examine the gamut of India's socio-political and cultural situation which, given its complexity and heterogeneity, of necessity required an equally intricate and broad based frame. (Salat 96)

The epic as well as Tharoor's novel hold a mirror to the social and political situations of India of the past and present. His use of history and pointed narratives reminds us of Foucault's impression that: "The traditional devices for constructing a comprehensive view of history and for retracing the past as a patient and continuous development must be systematically dismantled. (Foucault 22)

In sharp contrast to the great epic which makes way for the divine intervention for solution to the problems, Tharoor's novel employs human, realistic and practical approaches to the issues and Silvia Cappello's comments come handy:

Most episodes and events in the *Mahabharata* show a divine and just solution made acceptable through the shapes of myth. *The Great Indian Novel*, in contrast, is freed from any mythological solution, and every single episode is deeply rooted in the ground of possibility...*The Great Indian Novel* speaks words of truth like any other sacred text, but it does so without becoming part of a myth (72)

Tapan K. Ghosh's view about the use of narrative techniques by Tharoor, In order to fit the actual historical personalities and events into the narrative frame of the epic, Tharoor has made some changes in the cast of characters. Thus, instead of one hundred sons of Dhritarashtra and Gandhari, one finds only Priya Duryodhani who represents all the Kauravas with an altered sex. "The Pandavas, the other hand, are presented as an assorted groups and, except Yudhishtir who stands for Morarji Desai, they are conceived as the incarnations of some major institutions of the country like army, press, democracy and foreign service which are meant to husband and protect democracy represented by Draupadi" (22).

In Tharoor's depictions of the partition, the emergency, and other historical events, Tharoor demonstrated historical consciousness. He used partition as a metaphor for reconstructing the past reality from a fragmented view of history. Only literary evidence from the present may be used to verify the truth of the past in history. The imaginative re-telling and re-casting of Indian history and mythology in a culturally mixed atmosphere, is along with innovative literary techniques, results in a diverse range of literary works. These trend-setters have given Indian English writing a new direction.

The Great Indian Novel, Tharoor recast Indian history as mythical and democracy as caricature. Madhu Jain remarked in his review, "Shashi Tharoor has taken the *Mahabharata* as a blueprint and filled it with a contemporary cast for his witty send-up of independent India. A sort of India revisited with the dramatis personae of the epic getting quite a bruising" (8). *The Great Indian Novel* portrays the narrative of the battle for independence of Hastinapur under the administration of MahaguruGangaji (Mahatma Gandhi), his acclaimed Mango March (Salt March) and the birth of Indian democracy with a blind nationalist (Jawaharlal Nehru) and a British Vicereine (Lady Mountbatten). Other significant characters are Karna (Md. Ali Jinnah), Pandu, the Pale (Subhas Chandra Bose) and Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi).

Many people in Shashi Tharoor's story are still significant in India today. The novel begins with the entrance of Gangaji (Gandhi) on the Indian political scene and concludes with Priya Duryodhani's return to power following the fall of the Janta Government. "while he was alive, he was impossible to

ignore: once he had gone, he was impossible to imitate" (47). He established Gangaji as the most religious of the freedom warriors, who worked tirelessly to prepare the groundwork for an independent India. Truth, ahimsa, and Satyagraha were ingrained in him. However, he was the architect of India's split. Tharoor doesn't say Gangaji (Gandhiji) is to blame for the Hindu-Muslim divide. He makes it obvious that Gangaji's beliefs and values were to blame for Karna's defection from the Kauravas party. In the following lines, he describes Karna's opposition to Gandhiji:

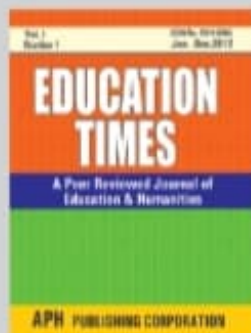
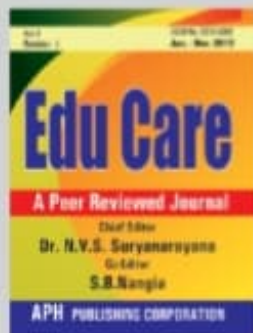
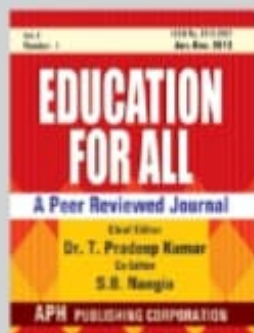
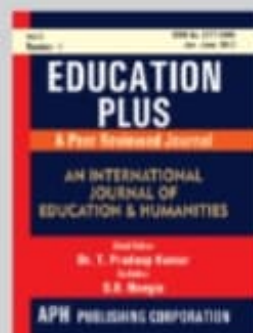
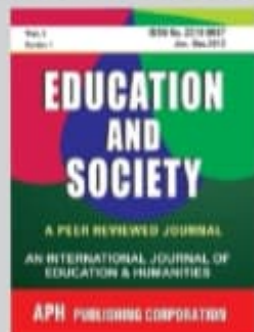
Karna was not much of Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of Hindu the Mahaguru's traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient text, his ashram, his constant harking back to an idealized pre- British past that Karna did not believe in.... All this made the young man mistrustful of the Great Teacher.... And Gangaji's mass politics were, to Karna, based on an appeal to the wrong instincts: they embodied an atavism that in his view would never take the country forward. (142)

The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor reveals India's unfortunate inability to develop another leader of Gangaji's stature. Dhritrashtra was the Kauravas' leader, betrayed Gangaji's loyalty and trust as soon as India was liberated. Tharoor has altered the characters using history as a raw element. He picks up on the plot and the characters' moral sentiments. He mythologized historical notions in order to modify his art without hesitating, even if it meant breaking them. As a result, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, which incorporates myth and history into a fictional scenario, is a literary masterwork of our time. The work is primarily told in the first person, as a series of monologues by the narrator. Ved Vyas seems to be an incarnation of time as he recounts his story to Ganapathi. In the narrative, he appears to be eternal, and rather than dying near the conclusion, he simply walks away from the scene.

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