

THE MYTHOPOETICS OF HISTORY IN THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

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CHAPTER II
THE MYTHOPOETICS OF HISTORY
IN *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL*

Every strong culture has a vital epic tradition. Epics account for the ‘beginnings’ of a civilization, and are enduring tales of reality, myth and history. They offer a commentary on the ancient heroic codes, associations of class, gender, sexuality, justice, war and other processes of a predominantly oral culture. While many great civilizations of the world—Mesopotamian, Sumerian, Egyptian, Aztec, to name a few—have disappeared without leaving behind a substantial literary record of the past, India has maintained a rich and enduring literary tradition of *puranas* and *itihisas*, *jatakas* and *anyapadeshas*, *natakas*, *mahakavyas*, *champus* and folktales, which even to the present day marks the foundation of Indian popular imagination. In contemporary postmodern times, it has been the redaction of epic narratives that is a favourite technique with storytellers.

Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) bases itself on the plot of the Mahabharata. The author resorts to two translations of the epic, viz. that of P. Lal (Poetry) and C. Rajagopalachari (Prose). Though the history of the twentieth century in India is an archetypal pattern between the epic and history, it is not a complete parallel. Though there is satire, it is not very serious or agitating and the unmistakable typifying of

characters gives us a lot of new versions of our contemporary political position. This parodic redaction of the Mahabharata teems with parallelisms in individuals, places and events. Where one character has no exact counterpart, he can be assumed as a symbol or an event or a situation. According to Robert Goldman, “. . . two somewhat disparaging subjects, the Mahabharata and the History of Modern India are cleverly and pointedly intertwined in this remarkable book” (www.indiastar.com). Twentieth century political history with its archetypal pattern between the epic and history is discernible in the novel, but it is not a complete parallelism. History and epic are treated not very seriously or solemnly but with satire and humour. Tharoor has managed to drive the point home and keeps up the tempo effectively from the game of dice to the end of the novel. It may be surprising that while the original Mahabharata centres around the battle of Kurukshetra, the battle as such is totally absent in Tharoor’s version. The battle of Mahabharata or “the Great India” is being constantly fought. The battle for power, ego clashes and personality problems of megalomaniacs are a day-to-day battle fought among the power-crazy in the country.

Shashi Tharoor’s greatest work as well as the most complete work of Fiction is *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), which documents his postmodern impressions of contemporary history. When a narrative of such vastness and magnitude comes under serious study, it is impossible

for any research scholar to cover everything in a single project. Hence, the method adopted here is to list select parallelisms, allusions and provide an appraisal of the situation, a critical review and a more elaborate reading from postmodernist and allegorical Factional aspects. *The Great Indian Novel* is in first person narration. According to Kanshika Chowdhury, “An analysis of the historical legacy of colonialism, however, does display a certain degree of uniformity in the postcolonial condition” (43). An attempt has been made to bring out the yoking of myth and history, as Ved Vyas in the novel says, “History. . . is full of savage ironics” (74). He also says “Facts—that is all I intend to record, facts and names. This is History” (86). Parody, satire, comedy, pun, wordplay, light verse, irony, sarcasm, jokes, witty digressions, self-reflexivity, biography, dramatization, literal and emblematic modes and semaphoring are interwoven to highlight the Factional fabric in the novel. The narrator is Ved Vyas. On his request, Brahma gives him a scribe, Ganapathi. This is the story told by Ved Vyas, shortened to V.V. in the text, 88 years old, and therefore “full of irrelevancies” (18). Tharoor weaves the real and colourful history of twentieth century politics against the backdrop of the epic and blends poetry and prose in an experimental style that helps him shift from serious and sublime moods to the highly ridiculous.

The table given below provides an overview of the close parallelisms in the novel between the characters and their epic counterparts:

<u>The Parody</u>	<u>The Original</u>
Ved Vyas (V.V.)	- Shashi Tharoor
Bhishma (Gangaji/Gangadatta)	- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi
Dritharashtra	- Jawaharlal Nehru
Duryodhana (Priya Duryodhani)	- Indira Priyadarshini
Pandu	- Subhash Chandra Bose
Karna (Mohammed Ali Karna)	- Mohammed Ali Jinnah
Kauravas	- The Congress Party
Jaya Prakash Drona	- Jayaprakash Narayan
Shishu Pal	- Lal Bahadur Shastri
Yudhishtir	- Morarji Desai
Ekalavya	- Jagjivan Ram
Krishna Parthasarathy	- Lord Krishna / A.K Gopalan / E.M.S. Namboodiripad / Kamaraj
Amba / Shikhand	- Nathuram Vinayak Godse
Pandava I	- Judiciary
Pandava II	- Defence
Pandava III	- Communication (Press/ Media)
Pandava IV	- Home Ministry

to other agents like Indra, Vayu and others to be the namesake father of the Panchapandavas, through Kunthi and Madri. As the characters begin to reveal their identities, it is clear that Dritharashtra, who studied in England and became a debater, Bachelor of Arts and a Fabian socialist, can be none other than Jawaharlal Nehru who, had he had eyesight, which is mental vision, would have made India's future different. Pandu the Pale with his Bengali look can be none other than Subhash Chandra Bose. Gangaji seeing the misery of lower class India under the British rule cannot tolerate the slogan of communal difference 'Hindu Pani' and 'Muslim Pani' (49).

The British generals try to teach Gangaji a lesson, in vain. His spirit is too indomitable. In the rally in Bibigarh Garden, ten thousand people are squeezed against each other. This event is termed by Tharoor as the Hastinapur Massacre which in actuality is the Jallianwalla Bagh mass killing. Dritharashtra has the blind man's gift of seeing the world not as it is but as he wants it to be. Pandu believed in taking stock of reality, Gangaji harnessed the divergent spirits of V.V.'s two sons for the common cause.

Ganga fasts and wins some petty concessions from the British. "Pandur takes the lathi blow on his head" (112) during the struggle; "Ganga's toothless smile of benevolence is given to Dritharashtra" (113). Dritharashtra, i.e., Nehru is the acknowledged next-in-command in the Congress. The Dhandi March is parodied as Mango March—mango has replaced salt. This is where Gangaji's famous sentence occurs ". . . would

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Pandava III	- Communication (Press/ Media)
Pandava IV	- Home Ministry

Pandava V	- External Affairs
Draupadi Demokrasi	- Democracy
Karnistan	- Pakistan
Kanika Menon	- Krishna Menon
Manimir	- Kashmir
Lord Drewpad	- Lord Mountbatten
Lady Georgina	- Lady Edwina Mountbatten
Col. Heaslop	- British General R.E Dyer
Sir Richard	- Sir Winston Churchill
Rafi	- Rafi Ahmed Kidwai
The Great Mango March	- The Dandy March
Bibigarh Massacre	- Jallianwalla Bagh Massacre

The Great Indian Novel is a puranic redaction, at times prophetic and at other times apocalyptic. It is mimetic to a great extent and mythology is used to bring out current affairs. The main characters are V.V.'s progenies—King Santhanu's heir apparent Bhisma is the backbone of the entire saga. Conformed bachelor that he is, as per his own vow of perpetual celibacy, he leaves the compounding of population to his brother Vichitra Veerya and incurs the vengeful wrath of Amba in the process of rejecting her. Gangadatta, the archetype of Gandhiji, starts the parodic redaction seen throughout Tharoor's version. While Dritharashtra sires the Kauravas through the voluntarily blindfolded Gandhari, Pandu has to resort

to other agents like Indra, Vayu and others to be the namesake father of the Panchapandavas, through Kunthi and Madri. As the characters begin to reveal their identities, it is clear that Dritharashtra, who studied in England and became a debater, Bachelor of Arts and a Fabian socialist, can be none other than Jawaharlal Nehru who, had he had eyesight, which is mental vision, would have made India's future different. Pandu the Pale with his Bengali look can be none other than Subhash Chandra Bose. Gangaji seeing the misery of lower class India under the British rule cannot tolerate the slogan of communal difference 'Hindu Pani' and 'Muslim Pani' (49).

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they tax the sunshine next?" (119). Karna, son of the Sun, rises in the form of Mohammed Ali Jinnah. He emerges in the Kaurava political scenario literally out of nowhere; here, like Subash, Jinnah respects Gandhiji, but cannot agree with many of his policies.

After the Independence was fought for and won, Tharoor's pen moves to the rising to power of Priya Duryodhani, a caricature of Indira Priyadarsini. Squashing every human obstacle that comes her way, Duryodhani reaches and wins the Prime Minister's chair. In the wish to stay on, she declares Emergency. Jayaprakash Drona, the Kaurava guru, is Jayaprakash Narayan, the sincere and unpolluted politician India saw at that time. In spite of Duryodhani's attempt to poison Bhima, he survives. Arjun, Nakul, Sahadev and even the just Yudishtir are kept under control. As a result, the Judiciary, Press / Media and the Service Departments, which the Pandavas stand for, suffer.

Independence is not won easily. Power politics and fight for the Congress party leadership runs rampant. Pandu disappears forever somewhere in Japan where Madri joins him in the permanent erasure. Karna rises to great dramatic national importance through his dominance in the Muslim territory. The Mahaguru, finding that persuading Pandu and trying to move him before he leaves is ineffectual, asks Dritharashtra, his pet, to step down. To step aside to the presidential fray to aim higher will be a

new strategy. Karna declares war, a war for a separate Muslim nation in which he can be No. 1.

With the Second World War in full swing, the Quit India Movement does not get much prominence. Side by side with this, Amba, no longer “the lissom beauty” (208) who has taken a vow of vendetta on Gangaji in the beginning of the narration has become Shikhand, the male-female mixture. This implies that Nathuram Vinayak Godse is fine-tuning his antenna to kill Gandhi. Lord Drewpad and Lady Georgina, Lord Mountbatten and Lady Edwina in real selves, decide to execute the passing over of India to the Indians as smoothly as possible. This comes after a plea from Gangaji: “leave us to God or anarchy” (222). Partition takes place. India and Pakistan are two free nations now. The Mahaguru’s era is over. With his elevated thoughts and bombastic words, Dritharashtra as the first premier tries to improve the upper strata with industrialisation, dam building and Five Year Plans. The last words of Gandhi, as three bullets pierce him, from the pistol of a man who felt that the Mahaguru loved the Muslims more than the Hindus: “Hey, Ram!” is interpreted by Tharoor beautifully as a reflection of what would have been Gandhiji’s last thought. In Tharoor’s version, Gangaji’s last words are “I . . . have. . . failed” (234). The birth of Draupadi, personifying democracy, follows. Draupadi is being shared by the five Pandavas, i.e. democracy is encrypted fully by the five power agencies it stands for.

People like Kanika (V. K. Krishna Menon) are mentioned. It is a touch-and-go entry and exit for many characters. Even Krishna is given only a local MLA's role, who, however does not fail to give Bhagavad-Gita-like advice. Anyway he is not the indomitable manifestation of Vishnu. Dritharashtra rules with the help of his daughter Duryodhani only to commit blunder after blunder, "The India China Bai Bai" attitude is one of them. Factories and industries rise up, while eighty percent of India's people continue to get no electricity and water. Dritharashtra cannot condone his own mistakes and dies because of them. The army taking over the ill-defended Portuguese colony of Comia (Goa), and the Mandarins from The Peoples' Republic of Chakra (China), and later they themselves biting the hand that fed them by waging war on India was too much for Dritharashtra. He belongs to this age but "The instruments of his failure did not" (305). By means of the radiant charm of the growing Draupadi, one can easily infer that democracy is flowering in the Indian Republic. A series of Prime Ministers since Nehru are mentioned, especially Shishupal with his childlike smallness, representing Lal Bahadur Shastri. Krishna is not given a strategic or dramatic importance except that he is a close friend and advisor to Arjun who stands for the press. Tharoor says, "In Priya Duryodhani India has a Frankenstein monster who is growing out of control" (347). Later, he says, "India had a new Queen Empress (Indira) anointed a hundred years after the last one" (352). Sidhartha Sankar Ray is

Shakuni Sankar Dey, Indira's best friend. He curtails the press and media totally. Akashvani, Doordarshan are all curtailed. Only censored news is given out. Sanjay Gandhi's time is mentioned as the peak time of regression, sterilization and unwanted and enforced reforms. Under Priya Duryodhani, India might even face extermination. Arjun getting Pashupata, the Ultimate, the Absolute, is mentioned to establish that after the Emergency was taken off, democracy started to grow again.

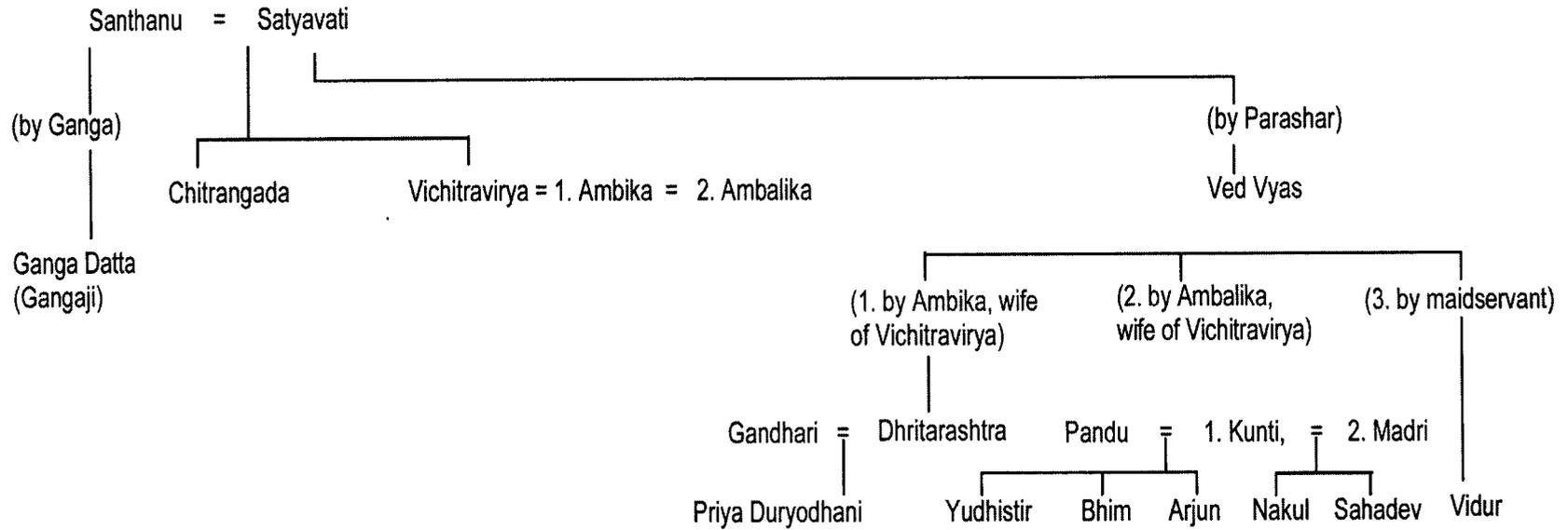
The Great Indian Novel, spreading out in eighteen chapters is out and out a work of Faction. "The book has 18 chapters. Incidentally, the Bhagavad Gita has 18 chapters; the war lasts for 18 days. But the 18 days here are revisited as episodes from the larger narrative of colonialism. . . ." (Hariharan 59). Taking Puranic characters and giving them different names is a difficult task done with great felicity. To make the incidents of Hastinapur correlate with pre- and post-Independence India is really ingenious, because the existing Purana is retold in relation to contemporary politics. The Kurukshetra battle is not described but we feel that the war is still raging. Only one Kaurava is mentioned but the other ninety-nine Kauravas are lurking somewhere in the background. It is this make-belief that makes this parody of the famous Itihasa or epic, a work of Faction. The name-change, place-shift and incident manipulation are inevitable.

Such a work with many chapters, plots and subplots with hundreds if not thousands of characters, needs an innovative storytelling technique

because the entire reading world knows the Mahabharata as the Novel of Great India. The original story with its innumerable plots and its shifts in tenses has all the characteristics of Fiction that have been stylishly used in this parodic version. In spite of his lengthy redaction V.V. tells Ganapathi: “. . . we have left too many of our dramatis personae inconveniently frozen in various parts of our tableau” (199).

Even in the concentrated quintessential summarization, original sentences from the text have been used. While “He died of oversex” (86) may seem blatant, after giving birth to Bhishma, Satyavati returned to her village and was examined by the senior midwife. “Her hymen was pronounced intact” (21), can be a satire on the commercialization of the medical profession. When Gandhiji asks whether “sunshine would be taxed next” (119), he is filled not only with wonderment but also a helplessness against the British. “Kunti was faithfully infidelious” (81) is an oxymoron. So is “the unseeing visionary” (111), and “It was like Caesar’s hand pushing a knife into Brutus” (174). The words “Leave us to God or to Anarchy” (222) from Gangaji, heart-rending and soulful, measure the depth of despondency to which the Indian mind had fallen. “His era was over” (223) evokes the callousness shown to Gandhiji by every Indian who supported the partition. According to Kanshika Chowdhury, “An analysis of the historical legacy of colonialism, however, does display a certain degree of uniformity in the postcolonial condition” (43).

The Great Indian Family



Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is principally in the **allegorical** mould. The novel's title, he tells us, is linked to the great epic Mahabharata, his primary source of inspiration. In the 'Afterword' to the novel, he expands on this: "Many of the characters, incidents and issues in this 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" (419). That the shape and sequential drift of the novel are dictated by a text already known to the readers is a confirmation that it is a rational construct predetermined by another work, amounting to Faction. In the opinion of Graham Smith, "Two qualities seem necessary to the successful achievement of the kind of novelistic interest: breadth of scope, the ability to deploy a great range of variety and detail, and coherence, the power to fuse disparate elements into a unified perspective" (106).

Though allegorical representations can be trying and exasperating for writers, because they have to strive consistently to work out varying levels of similitude with the chosen model, which puts arbitrary checks on their inventive faculty, they also provide them numerous advantages in the bargain. In Tharoor's case, the advantages are more than usual, because of the special features of his master-text. One does not need to overemphasize that the Mahabharata is both a grand, founding text of Indian literature and a part of its living tradition. Any work based on it

would be assured of general **acceptability** among its readers. The epic provided Tharoor with two additional gains. Though a part of the ancient Hindu tradition of *asa-puranas*, it scores over other texts of this kind, because of its known historical value. Compared, for example, with the ‘*yana*,’ which is considered more of a ‘*kavya*,’ it is more of ‘*itihasa*’ (epic), with a firm overarching historical core, which embraces virtually all aspects of human living. As Nilufer Bharucha remarks, “The Mahabharata is not merely a great narrative poem; it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge for our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, ecology—in short, our history in all its detail and density” (230). This makes it a suitable model for any fictional reconstruction of history. The Mahabharata is also an appropriate text for writing any account which centres around themes and concerns which are at the heart of Tharoor’s rendition of the history of India: power politics, schisms, personality-clashes, institutional structures, individual and social *dharma*, etc. According to Edward Hower, “. . . *The Great Indian Novel* is clearly more a hymn to the Indian people than a song of praise for their leaders” (6).

Since the Mahabharata does not have a fixed text, because of having gone through various versions from the time it was first conceived, it provides a great deal of flexibility to a writer who wants to use it as a model. Considering that the epic was rewritten from time to

time, Tharoor had the freedom to write, as it were, his own version of the epic, which he partially does. In spite of this, the novel conforms to its most known, recognized and accepted core. However, because of Tharoor's special requirement of fitting the actual historical personages and events into the narrative design and cast of characters of the epic, he had to make changes and adjustments of various kinds. The work in this regard assumes a **symbolic** relevance.

The yoking of myth and history seems to have restricted some of the novelist's fictional options, and as the novel progresses, characters become merely walking metaphors. Draupadi thus becomes a symbol of democracy, and her disrobing symbolic of the treatment meted out to democracy in contemporary India. Except Yudhishtir, the Pandavas too have been conceived as embodiments of various institutions, meant to keep democracy in good health. Because of changes in the character of *dramatis personae*, Tharoor had to make adjustments in the distribution of narrative space among people and events. Some **deviations from the original** also became inevitable. For example, there are no one hundred Kauravas; Priya Duryodhani has to represent them all with a changed sex. The reader fancies that they are all there, somewhere in the background. The parentage of the Pandavas in the narrative mismatches with the original. Adjustments in time-scheme and the sequential ordering of events also became necessary. Relating the epic to the actualities of

history also produced awkward incongruities. For example, in Tharoor's version, Yudhishtir has to share power for some time with Duryodhani, which is unimaginable in the original. Gangaji has to die before he witnesses the disrobing of Draupadi. In spite of such changes, Tharoor has worked out a reasonable degree of semblance between the mythical and the historical. While yoking the mythical and historical in such a vast canvas, chronology and sequential order have been inevitably sidelined, typical of postmodernism.

By casting actual people in history in the mould of characters from the epic, Tharoor aimed at writing a version of the history of India which would be laden with resonance; he also wanted the actual people and events to gain through the 'mythic experience'. Here too Tharoor stood to gain through his model. The energy of the narrative is not realized merely by Tharoor's contextualizing actual people and events in a suggestive frame, but also by the model on its own, which offers perspective on the present in terms of the past. It has been rightly pointed out by Irawati Karve that apart from its eternally-relevant core, the epic has a "surprising element of perennial contemporaneity" (25), which has accounted for its popularity and relevance in every age, and which has been admitted by Shashi Tharoor himself. When he relates the puranic characters with pre- and post-independence Indian leaders, a lot of intertextuality and intratextuality is discernible.

The variegated nature of the epic, with its loose, episodic structure, due to its multiple levels of accretion, provided Tharoor with another freedom: to use a wide range of stylistic variations in his Factional narrative, which he has exploited cleverly for critiquing historical personages and events. Tharoor seems to suggest that the history of India can be reflected only through satire, to throw certain trends and issues into focus than history makes possible. Thus, he has chosen several forms of irreverent styles, through which he also tries to approximate another feature of the original: the story of India being told by **many tellers**, even if it is ascribed only to one. But underneath the irreverent surface of Tharoor's narrative lies his serious involvement with mythical as well as contemporary history. The past is retold in order to bring the present sharply to the spotlight.

The entire narrative is dictated by the participant-narrator V.V. to Ganapathi. V.V. not only narrates his version of the history of India, he also comments on the nature of the historical discourse, building into it a strong element of self-consciousness. He calls his account a selective recall of the past with the help of his memory. That is why, in spite of its overall tone of playfulness and irreverence, he wants it to be taken seriously and not as a "piddling Western thriller" (18). The style is distinctly narrative. The account is also grounded in V.V.'s awareness of the **historiographic** context, which has been a marked feature of the **re-creations** of India's

past. This is true of history proper as well as of its representations in fiction. V.V.'s account implicitly contests the imperialist-colonial historiography and some forms of nationalist historiography as well. Though it is pretended biography, fact and myth mix to create pretended scenic and character descriptions.

By being more accessible and readable than serious academic histories, novels can influence public opinion and political practice. The connection of Tharoor's novel with the Mahabharata furthers its chances of readability and its impact on popular imagination. For a proper focus on Tharoor's involvement with history in general and the history of India in particular, three things have to be concentrated upon: i) the shape of the novel's coherent and understandable narrative, which is directed by the drift of the master narrative; ii) the bases and assumptions underlying the account, which provide Tharoor the required space for problematizing the discourse itself; iii) and the assessment of people and events who figure in the account, which include his comments on the Indian character and the institutional structure of its polity. So Fiction is born out of the encounter between the personal consciousness of the artist and the historical consciousness of the society.

In conformity with the narrative design of the Mahabharata, Tharoor begins his account from the time of the birth of the narrator, V.V., and then moves on to the loves of King Shantanu, his affair with

Satyavati, the appearance of Bhishma on the scene, and the birth of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidur. The birth of the five Pandavas is also described according to the original, though Tharoor spices the narration with humour and witty comment. The wives of Pandu, who have to have their children from other beings, speak in modern idioms, and even with a bit of levity. This gives the account an occasional parodic tinge, but Tharoor's engagement is not in **mocking the original**. He is only attempting to visualize his characters in a modern setting; this deviation in itself makes the account diverting. The narrative also makes room for a large number of incidents in the epic, which are not necessary for its historical design. But these diversions of self consciousness render a Factional touch to the entire work. These include the adventures of Pandavas during the course of their exile, their misadventure in the Lakshagraha, Bhima'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 fitting 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. This he chooses for dramatizing the scene of the disrobing of Draupadi and the ascent of Yudhishtir to heaven. At the dexterity of his hand, contemporary

history becomes fused with mythopoetic elements through postmodern **artistic techniques**, giving rise to Faction. 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 and is present in the book mostly through V.V. Tharoor uses the epic as a frame for accommodating another narrative, for which it provides a suggestive cover of inference and detail.

Tharoor's version of the historical account extends roughly from the time when Gandhi entered into Indian **politics** till the time Mrs. Gandhi returned to power after the fall of the Janata government. When Gandhi entered the Indian political scene, colonialism was consolidating into a tyrannical system. In a short comment the narrator lays bare the inhumanity of the colonial ethics and the hollowness of the claims made for it by British historians and writers: "[By] the simple logic of colonialism . . . the rules of humanity applied only to the rulers, for the rulers were people and the people were objects. Objects to be controlled, disciplined, kept in their place and taught lessons like so many animals" (80).

Since, like Bhishma, Gandhi 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 realizes the falsity of the Kauravas.

Another contender for power is a member of the same clan, but the circumstances of his birth prevent him from coming to the forefront. He is Karna, who stands for Jinnah. He succeeds in taking away a chunk of territory from the country to set up the state of Karnistan, which stands for Pakistan; this particular detail is a deviation from the original. But the **punning** and **allusions** are very apt. In India, except for a brief period, Nehru is succeeded by Duryodhani, who stands for Mrs. Gandhi. The fact that she equals the whole of the Kaurava clan is meant to suggest what one political commentator once remarked about her cabinet, that she was the only man there. She tries her best to keep the Pandavas away from the seat of power and devises stratagems even to finish them off. In making Pandavas into an assorted group, Tharoor could be held guilty of a confusion of categories: for mixing human beings with institutions, but such a charge would be unfair, because he had to observe similitude with the original.

It would not have been possible for the thousands of characters in the original epic to be given counterparts in the novel. If Yudhishtir is

Morarji Desai, Arjun, Bhim, Nakul, and Sahadev represent institutions of the press, army, bureaucracy, and Foreign Service. They are meant to protect democracy, represented through Draupadi. Since Nehru and Mrs. Gandhi dominated the political scene in post-independence India, they dominate the narrative as well. Most of the time, the Pandavas are away from the corridors of power and very appropriately spend their time with their guru Drona, who stands for Jayaprakash Narayan. Though Tharoor manages to fit the main events and personalities of pre- and post-independence India within the plot-outline of the main narrative, there is no special place for Krishna except as a friend of Arjun; he is just a small town MLA and even performs the ritual of giving a short spiritual discourse to him. It is quite likely that Tharoor took cover under the convenient fact that in earlier versions of the epic, Krishna was not as godly a figure as he became in later versions. Moreover, the Lord Krishna of the later versions could never have found an equivalent in Tharoor's novel.

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. Tharoor also succeeds in providing his narrative a tonality of romance of the original; simultaneously, he prepares the reader for alternating 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 work draws conceivable parallels between the historical and the mythical and the reader is able to grasp their implications for understanding the author's Factional version of India's past.

Since V.V. dictates the narrative to his amanuensis Ganapathi in several short and long spells, in which he digresses to address issues relating to historical discourse and the nature of the historical process, this provides Tharoor with space for articulating his own views through him. V.V. 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 is a collective entity, the result of the efforts of hundreds and thousands of people—nameless, faceless, unrecognized—but when it is shaped into a written, historical account, several of them get left out. This is a problem inherent in the very process of composing history. V.V. illustrates this with reference to the Independence of India:

Independence was not won by a series of isolated incidents but by the constant, unremitting actions of thousands, indeed hundreds of thousands, of men and women across the land. We tend, Ganapathi, 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 the 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. (109)

The idea of history as an ordered composition hints at two things. One, that we have to pay attention to the role of rhetoric in its creation; two, 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 or design. 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 V.V. describes unrecalled past, the things that get left out provide scope for other narratives, which can be equally interesting and valuable. V.V.'s version is based on his memory—the faltering memory of an old man; other versions could have other sources. All this implies that in historical accounts, the mode and purpose of recording the past are of utmost importance. When V.V. tells Ganapathi that “History marched on, leaving only a few footprints on our pages. Of its deep imprints on other sands,

you do not know because I do not choose to wash in the waters that have swept them away” (110); Tharoor draws attention to the selectivity of his version. It is significant that soon after V.V. finishes his account, he feels dissatisfied with it, because he has told his story from a completely mistaken perspective, and would like to retell it. Elsewhere, V.V. refers more specifically to the role of rhetoric in historical narratives. He tells Ganapathi:

. . . the flux of life is like a continuous, interminable wave; to capture it for posterity; we have to shape it, by visualizing it with a beginning and an end. The necessity for closure, which is an arbitrary invention of the teller, in particular, separates life from art. This arbitrariness is essential if we want the account to yield knowledge, even though that may not always help shape the course of future history. (169)

He knows that knowledge is not wisdom, because it “suffers from the crippling defect of ephemerality. All knowledge is transient, linked to the world around it and subject to change as the world changes. . . . It is the fate of the wise to understand the process of history and yet never to shape it” (163). This partially accounts for the rewriting of history, so that it can become relevant to the times in which one lives. The existing facts are shaped to suit the modern palate. V.V. modestly claims that he is

neither a wise man nor a philosopher; he is only a “chronicler and a participant in the events I describe” (163). But he insists on its truth-value, even though he knows that it is only a selective account, which is also suggested in a series of metaphors, which figure in a short poem about it: “. . . a slender filament / A rubbing from a colossal monument; full of colour and cast / A snip from a canvas impossibly vast; . . . recalled, words plucked from the crush” (164). Uma Parameswaran comments on the work, “Ved Vyas often pontificates but frequently, his statements are discerning encapsulations” (356). V.V. tells Ganapathi:

. . . 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 are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine . . .
Every Indian must forever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. (373)

This forceful statement captures the essence of **postmodernist** thinking on the nature of historical discourse. It admits that history is provisional and plural, and provides for the validity of different versions of the past. It also points to the limitations of the historians, which come in the way of their producing full and total accounts, and closely resembles Rushdie’s idea of the fragmentary nature of our perceptions. Interestingly, Tharoor,

like Rushdie, also refers to the possibility of historical reconstructions touching the extreme slide into non-history: However, this is only an extremist position; it does not inform the spirit of Tharoor's account of India's past. In fact, in spite of the awareness that Tharoor has of the problems of reconstructing the past and the provisional nature of the discourse itself, he is keen on giving his versions.

That the tone and tenor of Tharoor's version of India's history is shaped by his consciousness of the **historiographic** context is borne by the fact that it makes reference to earlier accounts, hagiographies as he calls them, which are indiscriminately laudatory in their evaluation of particular individuals, who had a part in India's struggle for freedom and its post-independence politics. His main complaint is against the ones which give 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 flattering estimates of Jayaprakash Narayan's abilities and his role during the emergency. However, the dissatisfaction with older accounts does not lead to any radical sift in his methodological apparatus or his historiographic stance. He does not, for example, approach the story of India's freedom struggle through classes or groups, which played a significant part in the nationalist movement, but were overshadowed by leaders of higher stature. Like the accounts he censures,

Tharoor's account is dominated by the leading lights of the day and is elitist in its approach. This is confirmed by the choice of the model for writing his version; the Mahabharata too sidelines ordinary beings for heroic figures. It is difficult to say whether Tharoor's allegorical mode foreclosed his option or whether the choice of the model reflects his understanding of the essence of what happened in India's freedom struggle. All that can be said is that Tharoor's account is an alternative version of the extant elitist versions. He implicitly criticizes them, because he thinks that they need to be redressed, to be cured of tilts and imbalances. However, though Tharoor recognizes the role of heroes in history, he neither romanticizes 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" (333). The author adopts neutrality and impartiality here.

Tharoor does not consider pluralistic historiography as a Western phenomenon. He thinks that it is an offshoot of a peculiarly **Indian** phenomenon, which is both a source of strength and weakness of its people. Tharoor's account is also informed by a specific understanding of history, which could partially explain his preference for concentrating on key figures in India's past. He considers history a process of births and rebirths, caused by sudden changes, projecting thereby a kind of catastrophic view of history; for the flowing dance of creating and

evolution is visualized by him not as a tranquilizing wave of smoothly predictable occurrences, but as a series of sudden events, unexpected happenings, dramas, crises, accidents and emergencies. He explains this cataclysmic view with the help of a familiar metaphor: This constant rebirth is never a simple matter of the future slipping bodily from the open womb of history. “Instead there is rape, and violence, and a struggle to emerge or to remain, until circumstances bloodily push tomorrow through the parted, heaving legs of today” (245). Tharoor thinks that it is universally true and it holds the key to our learning about what is right and proper. That is why he says through V.V.:

This is as 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. (245)

It is probably this mellowed understanding of historical processes that enables Tharoor to look upon the bleeding wounds of history with nonchalance. The Jallianwalla Bagh massacre, which is called the Bibigarh Massacre to spite at the likes of Paul Scott, is described with cool irony: “They loaded and fired their rifles coldly, clinically, without

haste or passion or sweat or anger. . . [The result was] a frozen tableau from a silent film, black and white and mute, an Indian *Guernica*" (80-1). The exploitative aspects of the British presence in India and its harmful effect on the economy have also been stressed: "...the British killed the Indian artisan, they created the Indian 'landless labourer', they exported our full employment and they invented our poverty" (95). This is yet another expulsion of positive ideas we may have about the rule of the Raj. The technique used is irony with a tinge of sadness.

The Indian resistance against the British is seen mostly through the efforts of Gandhi. The narrative provides his compact and well-rounded portrait, with the intention of reviving his memory among the public. For, Tharoor states that although Gandhi left behind a thoroughly documented life, almost like an open book, contemporary Indians have consigned him to the mists and myths of historical legend. With characteristic wit, he feels: "he might as well have been a character from the Mahabharata" (47). He believes that Indians have failed to relate him to their lives, not merely because of the bastard educational institutions the British sired on us, but also because the political system of the country promoted its own favourites by pinning the ones it did not like, including Gandhi, to concrete slabs. Through this ingenious mechanism, Gandhi was erased from the realm of cultural influence. Whenever Gandhi talks as Gangaji,

or acts as Ganga Datta, his self is conscious of what he is saying and to what effect. In his case study of the novel, V. S. Seturaman says:

The world of *The Great Indian Novel* is the world of Ved Vyas and Gangaji, the typical twentieth century vision of Bhishma, haunted by obsessions caused by repression and struggling to pull himself up with Dritharashtra oscillating between the materialism and socialistic ideas of the West on the one hand, and the moral and cultural values of the East as represented by Gangaji on the other. (30)

Gandhi is commended for awakening public consciousness against the British by perfecting a system of non-violent struggle against their unjust exercise of power. As solid examples of Gandhi's triumph, he documents his charisma in Motihari, where he pushed the British to the defensive and forced them to see his point of view. The uniqueness and efficiency of his concept of truth, which entailed taking punishment willingly for the strength of one's convictions is thoroughly approved: "No dictionary imbues the word with the depth of meaning Gangaji gave it. His truth emerged from his convictions: it meant not only what was accurate, but what was just and therefore right. Truth could not be obtained by untruthful, or unjust, or violent means" (48). Gandhi's concept of non-violent struggle is praised not only for being worthy in itself, but also as a timely and effective method for fighting the British:

“Where sporadic terrorism and moderate constitutionalism had both proved ineffective, Ganga took the issue of freedom to the people as one of simple right and wrong—law versus conscience—and gave them a method to which the British had no response” (55).

One of the significant aspects of Gandhi’s campaign was that it brought ordinary men and women into the mainstream of the freedom struggle. With this mass base, the poor and the middle classes got ‘their place in the sun’ and the concept of nationalism acquired a new orientation. The account also emphasizes that in spite of piquancies in Gandhi’s style of functioning, he was a master strategist; though there was a great deal of drama and theatricality to his campaigns, which has been used at times, even to great comic effect, he gave the movement much-needed publicity in and outside India. The people, whom he made into a strong force, were convinced that they “were not led by a saint with his head in the clouds, but by a master tactician with his feet on the ground” (122). They imagined that he was an idealistic dreamer till he proved that he was a great pragmatist. Amidst the illusion of freedom, they could see the truth of his will.

Though the narrative praises Gandhi’s role in India’s struggle towards freedom, singling out in particular his honesty and steadfastness of purpose, it does not overlook the amusing aspects of his personality and thinking. Repeated attention is drawn to his numerous fads and his

baggage from the past—enemas, sanitary preoccupations, fasts, love for the cow, etc. On account of the bewildering diversity of his reading—Vedas, Manu, Tolstoy, Ruskin, Bible, Gita—his dividing line between matters temporal and spiritual often became somewhat fuzzy: “His manner had grown increasingly other-worldly while his conversational obligations remained entirely mundane, and he would often startle his audiences with pronouncements which led them to wonder in which century he was living at any given moment” (26). His **realism** had an unexpected touch of **magic** in it.

This aspect of Gandhi’s thinking, in which he would lapse into the nebulosity of timelessness, has been severely censured, for being inimical to changes which were necessary for shaking Indians out of their fatalistic moorings. Tharoor’s narrative draws attention to its other serious implications. Because of his deep-rooted grounding in the Hindu tradition, Gandhi consistently exploited Hindu symbols for galvanizing people against the British; this made the leaders of other communities conscious of the dangers of the rising tide of Hindu influence to their identity. It is true that at no place does the narrative suggest that Gandhi caused disaffection among the minorities, but makes it amply clear that it led to the alienation of political leaders like Jinnah. This eventually sharpened the sources of conflict between the Hindus and Muslims which led to the division of the country. Since several historians have expressed

their uneasiness over this aspect of Gandhi's thinking and practice, it is interesting to note how Tharoor touches the disapproval of Jinnah for Gandhi:

Karna was not much of a Muslim but he found Gangaji too much of a Hindu. The Mahaguru's traditional attire, his spiritualism, his spouting of the ancient texts, 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. A Kaurava Party of prayer-meetings and unselective eclecticism was not a party he would have cared to lead, let alone to remain a member of. (142)

Jinnah's dislike of Gandhi's ways and thinking is quite well-known and has been widely documented. It is somewhat ironical that a person who fought all his life for Hindu-Muslim unity has to be made responsible for encouraging Muslim separatism, but this is implicit in Tharoor's understanding of Gandhi and of several historians too. Tharoor's narrative unequivocally criticizes Gandhi for slackening his grip over the Congress party around the time of India's independence,

when it was needed most. He thinks that Gandhi was wrong in letting the question of Partition be decided by his lieutenants. That is why the scene of Gandhi's death in Tharoor's account is important; here the mythic charge is at its strongest. He lets Gandhi's murderer Shikhand berate him for his dereliction of duty and for neglecting the issue of leadership of the party. His words openly declare him a failure: "You make me sick, Bhishma. Your life has been a waste, unproductive, barren. You are nothing but an impotent old walrus sucking other reptiles' eggs, an infertile old fool . . . a man who is less than a woman. The tragedy of this country springs from you . . ." (232). These are harsh words and cannot be taken lightly. Their import is reinforced by the words Tharoor puts in the mouth of the dying leader. Instead of uttering "Hey Ram," as is commonly believed, he says: "I . . . have . . . failed" (234). Here is a beautiful work of Fiction—the translation of "Hey Ram" to "I . . . have . . . failed." The emotion, the effect, is the same.

The narrative picks actual words of various world leaders and famous people who spoke on the occasion of Gandhi's death. The narrators' comment suggests several causes for his death, in which both he and the people of the country are implicated. The overall tone confirms that he died a defeated and disillusioned man. This again shatters the myth that Gandhiji felt jubilant about the victory:

I will not ask whether Amba / Shikhandin was truly responsible for the Mahaguru's death, or whether it was not India collectively that ended Gangaji's life by tearing itself apart. Nor will I ask you, Ganapathi, to reflect on whether Ganga Datta might in fact have been the victim of an overwhelming death-wish, a desire to end a life that he saw starkly as having served no purpose, a desire buried deep in the urge that had led him, all those years earlier, to create and nurture his own executioner. (234)

Some supernatural element is at work here, as if Gandhiji in his disappointment had a death wish and eventually realized it. As a possible contender for the leadership of the Congress party, the narrative dwells on the vicissitudes of Subhash's career vis-à-vis his relationship with Gandhi. It praises his efforts in the cause of India's freedom, but also explains how he perished because of his quixotic dreams. Nevertheless, it is made clear that he lost the race for the leadership of the Congress party because Gandhi preferred Nehru over him. Tharoor's extremely negative estimate of Nehru's abilities and his role in the politics of pre-and post-independence India is suggested in the allegorical frame itself. As Dhritarashtra, he is made into Gandhi's "blind and visionary son," with a vaulting ambition and monumental ego. His English education comes in for special attack: it gave him only "a formidable vocabulary and the

vaguely abstracted manner of the over-educated” (41). His blindness is used to a trenchant metaphoric effect: “. . . the blind man’s gift of seeing the world not as it was, but as he wanted it to be” (85), made him completely out of tune with the reality around him. Even though he was absent from some of the most momentous events in Gandhi’s struggle against the British, he succeeded in gaining importance when the fate of the country was about to be decided. The 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 for having failed to see that she was used by her husband as his secret weapon. Indeed a bold challenge levelled against the popular image of Nehru, but Tharoor’s sure and steady pen draws this new image realistically and convincingly.

Tharoor holds that after taking 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 having mastered the technique of self-perpetuation by issuing periodic threats of resignation. His major policies also come in for attack. Nehru’s emphasis on setting up big and heavy industries in the country was ill-conceived, because it ignored the unpleasant reality that eighty percent people were without the basic amenities of life, such as drinking water, shelter, and electricity. It was wrong to concentrate too much on

building institutions of higher learning, because they only turned out products for the international market, and ignored the huge forests of illiteracy which covered vast regions of the country. The setting up of the huge centralised and cumbersome machinery of parliamentary democracy proved ineffective because the parliament passed laws that a few implemented and many ignored. Considering that the efficacy of the Nehruvian model of economic development has been disputed and that the authority of the state in rendering social and economic balance has proved ineffective, there is a great deal of truth in Tharoor's attack on Nehruvian policy and performance. It is an eye-opener to the millions that adore the Nehruvian monarchy and divine right theory of the present day. Nehru's popularity, if at all, was illusory, whereas his mistakes were real.

Tharoor's main complaint against Nehru is that at the cost of neglecting the need of his country, he directed his energies towards gaining recognition in international arenas. He worked for promoting non-alignment without estimating whether the country was strong and powerful enough to give it any meaningful credibility. In a sarcastic tone, the narrator states 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" (295). This is reflected most conspicuously in his failure on the foreign front, when the country had to

suffer military humiliation at the hands of China. This broke his heart and hastened his death. In Tharoor's allegorical design, which is his main Factional device, Indian democracy, represented in the person of Draupadi, has a mixed parentage: she is the product of the illicit union of Nehru and Edwina, which is meant to suggest that India came into being because of their unholy alliance. Through her marriage to Arjun, Draupadi is shared by his other brothers, who personify "the hopes and the limitations of each of the national institutions they served" (319). During Nehru's tenure, her health remained stable, but started deteriorating after his death, especially during the time of Mrs. Gandhi. The narrative records, how, after the short spell of Shishu Pal's (Lal Bahadur Shastri) tenure in office, the elders chose Mrs. Gandhi to lead the party, mainly because they thought her pliable. But very soon she turned into a menacingly arrogant person, and threatened the very fabric of the democratic structure of the country.

Tharoor prepares the readers for a negative portrait of Mrs. Gandhi through a piece of well-conceived anticipation, in which he uses animal imagery to suggest the brutality and oppression of her times:

[Her birth-cry] was a rare, sharp, high-pitched cry like that of a donkey in heat, and as it echoed around the house a sound started up outside as if in response, a weird, animal moan, and then the sounds grew, as donkeys brayed in the

distance, mares neighed in their pens, jackals howled in the forests, and through the cacophony we heard the beating of wings at the windows, the caw-caw-cawing of a cackle of crows, and penetrating through the shadows, the piercing shriek of the hooded vultures circling above the palace of Hastinapur. (73)

Horror and terror are the pervading forces in this tactic of using metaphors. The scene is reminiscent of Calpurnia's ominous dream before Caesar's assassination in William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. This arguably allusive association powerfully evokes the political psyche of a country in the throes of agony and rebellion.

At first, Mrs. Gandhi tried to entrench herself by carrying out a series of populist measures, such as the abolition of privy purses and the nationalization of banks, which made hardly any difference to the people in general. Later, she promoted the culture of slogans, which replaced policies. Tharoor blames the left and progressive forces in the country, including recognized political parties, for being taken in by her rhetoric and bluster. In her own party, Mrs. Gandhi reduced even cabinet ministers into non-entities. Her return to power made her more arrogant and dictatorial in her style of functioning. She succeeded in arrogating to herself the power to "prohibit, proscribe, profane, prolate, prosecute or prostitute all the freedoms the national movement had brought to attain. . ."

(357). Events took on a dizzy turn when, after the Allahabad High Court judgement, she declared a state of Emergency in the country, which proved the most disastrous part of her tenure. What she accomplished, says V.V., is “. . . An India where a Priya Duryodhani can be re-elected because seven hundred million people cannot produce anyone better . . . her greatest failure—the alienation of some of the country’s most loyal citizens to the point where two of them consider it a greater duty to kill her than protect her, as they were employed to do” (412). According to John Calvin Bachelor, “Ved examines his granddaughter from birth to death, and what he finds is a poisonous, treacherous, loveless, pointless human being, a sort of career pest” (1).

Tharoor understands the Emergency in its very immediate context, when it was declared by Mrs. Gandhi. He is critical of her decision, but also blames the people whose attacks pushed her into taking the extreme step, especially Jayaprakash Narayan, who launched a full-scale movement against her. Though he concedes that arrests and censorship and other repressive measures taken by her were “primarily cynical and self-serving,” he adds, “I still believed that the political chaos in the country, fuelled by Drona’s idealistic but confused Uprising which a variety of political opportunists had joined and exploited, could have led the country nowhere but to anarchy” (369). In this, Tharoor’s thinking is different from that of Nayantara Sahgal in *Rich Like Us* (1985) and

Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children* (1981). In fact, his scepticism about the worth of the people who combined against her is reflected in his comment on their coming to power: "The Indian people gave themselves the privilege of replacing a determined, collected tyrant with an indeterminate collection of tyros" (402).

Tharoor's views on the Emergency and the people who fought against Mrs. Gandhi stem from his estimate of the character and abilities of Jayaprakash Narayan. The narrative gives him his due by documenting in detail how he was far away from the taint of power and made strenuous efforts for raising the consciousness of the people by educating them about their rights and duties; he provided moral support to the protecting pillars of Indian democracy, but his complicated thinking proved his undoing. In spite of the praise showered on him after his death, in which he was compared with Gandhi, the narrator makes a mixed comment:

. . . he was a flawed Mahaguru, a man whose goodness was not balanced by the shrewdness of the original. He had stood above his peers, a secular saint whose commitment to truth and justice was beyond question. But though his loyalty to the ideals of a democratic and egalitarian India could not be challenged, Drona's abhorrence of power had made him unfit to wield it. He had offered inspiration but not involvement, charisma but not change, hope but no

harness. Having abandoned politics when he seemed the likely heir-apparent to Dhritarashtra, he tried to stay above it all after the fall of Dhritarashtra's daughter, and so he let the revolution he had wrought fall into the hands of lesser men who were unworthy of his ideals. (409)

With the coming to power of Mrs. Gandhi, the narrative brings to an end the story of India's political vicissitudes. Its thrust is to suggest Tharoor's disillusionment with the country's declining political culture. Its institutional structures, such as the press, bureaucracy, and party system have not done much in promoting any meaningful change in the country. Tharoor makes us believe that the Indian people in general have perfected the art of living with whatever they get, strengthening their vestiges of fatalism. He visualizes a bleak future for the country. This partially explains why people have become obsessive about their past. For some it is a source of power, for others a comfortable retreat.

A kind of appropriate **parody** is at work in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* as a major aspect of Fiction. The manner in which Tharoor appropriates and parodies narratives and engages in a dialogic relationship with the reader is noteworthy. Tharoor acknowledges his indebtedness to the Mahabharata, the master-narrative that has come to play a major role in the Indian consciousness. He remarks that the Mahabharata has come to stand for so much in the popular consciousness

and the personages in it have become household words, standing for public virtues and vices, and the issue it raises, as well as the values it seeks to promote, are central to an understanding of what makes India. To take characters and situations that are so laden with resonance, and to alter and shape them to tell a contemporary story, was a challenge that offered the author a rare opportunity to strike familiar chords while playing an unfamiliar tune. Tharoor's experiments with Faction, in this regard, are not merely attempts to explore the thinning line between history and fiction, but also an effort to portray the national consciousness of a people embodied in the myths, legends, and the socio-political and cultural milieu of its narratives.

Apart from its parodic parallelisms with the Mahabharata starting with the title itself, the eighteen chapters of Tharoor's narrative also draw upon seminal texts of the colonial and postcolonial canons, such as *The Jungle Book* (1894), *A Passage to India* (1924), *The Sun Also Rises* (1926), *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966) and *Midnight's Children* (1981). While these texts are appropriated as chapter titles, such references also enable Tharoor to decrown the epic and, at the same time, to regenerate it, showing the blend of truth and imagination.

Tharoor's text, in other words, activates a dialogue with other texts which are submerged or referred to, engendering a new kind of language. This kind of discourse can be termed parodic, though the other texts are

not held in ridicule. Linda Hutcheon in *A Theory of Parody* suggests that the older texts that are parodied serve as a background and as ‘an ideal’ or ‘norm’ from which come the modern parts (1985: 5). The backgrounded text is thus activated, and can be seen as one sure method of dealing with the past and the present. Tharoor’s endeavour is not mere allegorizing by incorporating the political scenario of twentieth-century India. It is an attempt at a re-reading of an old story and an exploration into the relationship between the narrator, the scribe and the reader. In “The Novelist as Teacher,” Chinua Achebe makes a comment that would aptly suit Tharoor’s objective: “I would be quite satisfied if my works (especially the ones set in the past) – did teach my readers their past with all their imperfections. . .” (Achebe 1988: 45).

In *The Great Indian Novel*, the very writing of the text throws up postmodern implications. As in the epic, Ganapathi is the scribe, named by the South Indian word rather than the North Indian Ganesh, and described as having “shrewd and intelligent eyes through which he is staring owlshly at me as I dictate these words” (18). In the epic, Ganapathi lays down the condition that the narrative should not be broken in between and if it is broken, he would refuse to continue and leave. Ved Vyas in lieu lays down the condition that Ganapathi should understand the verses before taking them down. This pact is here transmuted to a lot of questions about the narrative. Ved Vyas and Ganapathi enter into a

similar pact but the tone of the passage which describes this is one of cheerful irreverence:

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 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. (18)

V.V.'s talk is fiction but 'taking a leak' and using a Japanese tape recorder are facts. This anachronism acts as a means of blending the old and the new, and raises the question of how accurate the memory of the narrator is. Ved Vyas admits he cannot rely entirely on his ability to articulate his memories. The very fact of V.V.'s contemporaneity, that he is not the divine seer who is the omnipotent creator of the text, underscores his subjective position as the postmodern narrator. Ved Vyas tells the story to Ganapathi and the story is written down. In other words, the text is born out of a written transcription of an oral narrative. One tends to ask in this context, who gets to tell the story? Could either version—that of Ved Vyas or Ganapathi—be authentic? Where does the

reader position himself in such a narrative? Is the author subconsciously inside the novel or self-consciously outside it?

Ayyappa Paniker sees the Ved Vyas-Ganapathi relationship as the “most delectable part of this work.” He suggests:

. . . the author versus scribe is an interesting question: how much of the resultant work is wholly the author’s or wholly the scribe’s – the duality is one of the crucial features of the entire work: it makes the ancient tale a very modern one. It is a typical postmodernistic work. This means the reader has to know his ur-text – the source work – as well. (Paniker 13)

But merely knowing the ur-text does not help position the reader in the narrative. The reader has to enter the text through a dialogical act and engage himself with the narrator and the scribe as one more voice. He thus identifies himself in a Factional world.

The reader enters a world of **polyphony**. A polyphonic novel, is essentially dialogic. The essence of polyphony lies precisely in the fact that the voices remain independent and, as such, are combined in a unity of a higher order than in homophony. If one is to talk about individual will, then it is precisely in polyphony that a combination of several individual wills takes place that the boundaries of the individual will can be in principle exceeded. One could put it this way: the artistic will of

polyphony is a will to combine many wills, a will to the event. V.V.'s voice which encapsulates other myriad voices, speaks out to Ganapathi, and becomes the written voice we read. V.V.'s narrative, then, combines all the other voices and stories that engender his story and engage Ganapathi and the reader dialogically in the story. It is not the individual voice of V.V. that tells the story, but the voice made polyphonic through a process of dialogism that transcend the limits set by the master-narrative to tell the story. Tharoor the master narrator is the one who really talks to us as Ved Vyas and the other characters. Where is the truth and where is the fiction then? They blend into the margin and bring out Faction.

The level of discourse moves in such a way that the reader is also drawn into it: "Behave yourself, Ganapathi. What do you mean, how could I know? You don't expect me to spell out everything, do you? I just know, that's all. I know a great many things that people don't know I know, and that should be good enough for you, young man" (65). We see humour here, clothed in false authority. It is obvious that V.V. leaves gaps in his narrative. It is a dramatic monologue. The reader's voice is implicated in the questions that Ganapathi asks Ved Vyas and to the voices in the gaps. The omniscience of the narrator is also rejected, evident in V.V.'s comment many a time. Tharoor is here problematizing the authority of the narrator and questioning his very legitimacy to narrate stories. In the epic, Ved Vyas' narration is layered with stories. There is

Ved Vyas himself appearing in the epic to tell Yudhishtir, the eldest of the Pandavas, the story of Nala and Damayanti, Sanjaya giving an on-the-spot commentary of the Kurukshetra war to Dhritarashtra, and so on, emphasizing the validity of the tales and the teller. *The Great Indian Novel*, like the epic itself, evolves as a tale told by many a narrator, but sans the legitimacy of any one voice or version.

The authority of the one, omniscient voice gives way to **multiplicity**. The writer, as Mikhail Bakhtin purports in *The Dialogic Imagination*, is in a quest for freedom from a unitary and singular language. He contends:

Unitary language constitutes the theoretical expression of the historical processes of linguistic unification and centralization, an expression of the centripetal forces of language. A unitary language is not something given but is always in essence posited—and at every moment of its linguistic life it is opposed to the realities of heteroglossia.

(270)

It is perhaps Tharoor's yearning to be free from a unitary language and story that makes him at times relegate the epic to the background in a mocking way and embroider modern Indian history and raise narrative problems through it. He is also destiny's observer. Ved Vyas' mind here encapsulates Indian history into the epic that he knows. The growth of the

Kuru family is loosely followed in the novel except for the **mythical distortions** which confirm the movement of the discourse towards parody. In the epic, Gandhari who ties a black cloth across her eyes and who has one hundred sons through divine blessings lives on with her husband, bearing the loss of all her sons in the Kurukshetra war. Tharoor's subversion presents Gandhari the Grim who gives birth to a baby girl who is named Priya Duryodhani. Gandhari the Grim is seen complaining to Ved Vyas that she had been promised one hundred sons and the promise was not kept. Gandhari the Grim dies much before her daughter's death. Priya Duryodhani is assassinated in the novel and not killed in war as the sons of Gandhari were. These changes, effecting thematic re-orientations necessary in Tharoor's narrative, make it Faction, and a literary work in its own stead, rather than confining it to an imitation of the original.

As the reader who has entered the text as one more voice in the double-voiced narrative, he has to decode the parodic structure envisaged and also the subversion. In Linda Hutcheon's terms, readers "who decode parodic structures. . . also act as decoders of encoded intent." "Parody" for her is "not just a structural 'phenomenon' but the entire enunciation of discourse" (Hutcheon 1985: 23). The enunciative act demands communication as the primary thing and it is in Hutcheon's terms "the contextualised production and reception of parodied texts" (Hutcheon

1985: 90). Tharoor's act of enunciation realizes itself in the narrative when the reader participates in the double voicing. In other words, the act of enunciation itself is doubled.

This kind of double enunciation can be seen both in the scene where Draupadi Mokradi is disrobed and in the subsequent game of dice. Draupadi who came out of the flames of the sacrifice offered by King Drupada, in the novel is born of the union of Dhritarashtra and Lady Draupadi. Draupadi Mokradi, in addition to being the wife of the Pandavas, is raised to the level of a symbol. She stands for democracy. The attempted disrobing of Draupadi in the court is given a repeat performance in Tharoor but the result is a political commentary on the plight of democracy. The game of dice and the subsequent attempt of disrobing Draupadi occur in V.V.'s dream but, unlike the original where the Pandavas are exiled for fourteen years, Arjun challenges Priya Duryodhani for a game of dice and Duryodhani is given the first chance:

She picked up the dice, then looked at them, at Arjun, and at the silent faces around the room. And as she prepared to throw them, Ganapathi, I realized, even in my sleep, that I didn't need to dream any more. Her strained face, her staring eyes, the trembling of her hands as she picked up the instruments of her fate, told their own story. She was going to lose. (383)

The very confession that V.V. saw all this in a dream and is recounting it makes his story all the more suspect. However, the dream is the encoded intent which the reader has to decode. By making the disrobing scene a dream which he experiences and the game of dice yielding different results, the narrator forces upon the reader the need for a decoding. The scribe, having been chastised before for questioning the narrator, is quiet this time. The narrator's voice which comes from the dream world has to be responded to by a voice that questions and at the same time reinforces the dream. In other words the reader is compelled into the narrator's vision, and is forced to enter into complicity with his vision.

It is perhaps the same complicity which makes the story told by V.V. problematise the notion of ending:

.... 'the end' was an idea that I suddenly realized meant nothing to me. I did not begin the story in order to end it; the essence of the tale lay in the telling. 'What happened next?' I could answer, but 'what happened in the end?' I could not even understand. . . . there is, in short, Ganapathi, no *end* to the story of life. There are merely pauses. The end is the arbitrary invention of the teller, but there can be no finality about his choice. Today's end is, after all, only tomorrow's beginning. (162-3)

The novel, in the words of Clark Blaise, “. . . ends on precisely the note it had begun. . . and will go on. . . that Indira will reappear in many disguises; dogs are gods, Bengalis are Belgians because even anagrams hold equivalent philosophic truths” (345). Inevitably the story continues elsewhere. In a sense, the story keeps changing hands between the narrator, the scribe and the reader. It is in different states of encoding and decoding and double voicing, another method the author uses, to bring about Fiction.

V.V. himself is critical about the act of narration raising issues of appropriation, narrative occlusion, and the pleasures of the text. He remarks: “This story, like that of our country, is a story of betrayed expectations, yours as much 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” (411). The pleasure of the text for the reader is finally in the act of enunciation. So, too, V.V. realizes that he has no choice but to retell the story, he must begin again. For this he has to have his scribe back and gets him back: “Your eyebrows and nose, Ganapathi, twist themselves into an elephantine question-mark. Have I, you seem to be asking, come to the end of my story? How forgetful you are! It was just the other day that I told you stories never end, they just continue somewhere else” (418).

V.V. confesses that he has told his story from “a completely mistaken perspective” and has thought about it and realized that “[he has] no choice. [He] must retell it” (418). This is a technique employed to activate the sense of unreliability of the narrator, thus heightening the act of reading itself. Even Ganapathi as scribe and reader is not spared: “I see the look of dismay on your face. I am sorry, Ganapathi. I shall have a word with my friend Brahm tomorrow. In the meantime, let us begin again” (418).

Parody thus emerges as a technique by which one text encapsulates the other. Tharoor’s adherence to facts is in fact a subversion of the method of realism. To an assiduous researcher who is very particular about minute details, the constant reference to facts is a veneer with which the narrator of the biography enters into the story. Tharoor subtly hints at the state of mind of the narrator through the course of the novel. The statement is so well concealed that it comes almost as a sudden volte-face in the uniform thought flow in the reader. Tharoor as discussed earlier asks for an un hiding of the possibilities shelved by the narrator. Tharoor has created an elaborate fiction and to get into it, the **reader** has to **author** the sub-text. The reader also has to become the **narrator** Tharoor as he is forced to recognize contradictions in Ved Vyas’ narrative. But he must avoid the kind of appropriation which makes the reader of the ‘life story’ its ultimate hero, a replacement for the subject.

Tharoor problematises both the act of reading and the act of storytelling. Parody, as a technique of narration, does not stop with the narrator. It extends to the reader as well. Parody as a narrative technique subverts the colonial narrative and repositions it to cater to the needs of a post-colonial world. As Linda Hutcheon puts it: "Parody today is endowed with the power to renew. It need not do so, but it can. We must never forget the hybrid nature of parody's connection with the 'world,' the mixture of conservative and revolutionary impulses in both aesthetic and social terms" (Hutcheon 1985: 47). The narrative technique employed and the reading it elicits strongly affirms that there is not just one story or a definitive ending. Stories are generated. They are possibilities. The master-narrative of colonialism is rewritten through the act of telling. Telling the story occupies centre stage. This is made possible by the narrative strategy employed, which calls for a dialogised interaction with the reader. The internalised dialogue between the writer and the master-narrative has to be re-dialogised by the reader in an active reading and a recontextualising of the old story. The reader then becomes an active agent, along with the writer, in the creation of the post colonial narrative.

According to S. Chakravarty, the primary emphasis of the author is on characters and not on events. In the novel, "history becomes transmuted to myth, characters become figures from contemporary history" (103). He continues:

. . . The two desires or obsessions for country and off spring i.e.; ‘Rajyamoah’ and ‘Puthramoah’ are at the root of Nehru’s failure as well as his daughter’s declaration of the dreaded Emergency. Jinnah, who is Karna, is seen as a person who suffers from identity crisis. His problem is an existentialist one .The great orator that was Jinnah cannot but be respected for his love for his country, hatred for the foreigners and Jawaharlal Nehru himself, who usurped the Prime Minister’s post from him was of the opinion that in all truthfulness, Jinnah was a good man at heart. This is where the hidden as well as obvious factors fuse. (102-3)

Just as Shikhand was only an instrument in Bhishma’s death, Godse has only indirectly reprinted and recreated the atmosphere. One has to remember that many were against Gandhiji at that time because they felt this way— not that he loved the Hindus less, but that he loved the Muslims more. Ashwathama with the beard can be a disciple of Jayaprakash Narayan, viz. Chandrasekhar. Ekalavya has been equated to V.V. Giri though the parallelism is not clear or foolproof. A tactfulness in forcing another’s will is common to the original as well as the clone. Manimir stands for Kashmir and it can also stand for money for which people fight. The Republic of Chakra is China, where we see a wordplay; ‘chini’ means sugar and while ‘chakra’ is a Sanskrit word, shakar (sugar)

is a Hindi word. Being sugary with China, we landed in trouble with the meaningless and exploited slogan “India-China Bhai Bhai.”

There is an instant mingling of past and present styles and the fusion is so gradual and unnoticeable that the book becomes highly readable. Tharoor’s language is a combination of Indian, British and American English. His attitude to life in general and his approval and positive as well as negative criticism of Indian traditions and native customs, his thoughts on Hinduism, Gandhi, and world politics, his treatment of love, politics and philosophy, his economic, cultural and social stand in the community, his attitude towards women— in toto, all his attitudes and aptitudes have come out beautifully in all his works especially in this political rhetoric.

Though the restless and retired but venerable Ved Vyas, India’s oldest politician, dictates his singular memories to Ganapathi his scribe, he is at times cantankerous, digresses at his will and goes to the extreme of stream-of-consciousness. Yet he is convincing. He is accepted by one and all, axiomatically. From the princely state of Hastinapur, soon to be annexed to the British Raj, V.V.’s saga unfolds to oddly familiar events and personages. From the passionate coupling of a blind nationalist and a British Vicerine our democracy is born, shameful though it may be. *The Great Indian Novel* has everything—what is, what was, what should have been as well as what could not possibly be. With calculated effrontery

and considerable brilliance, India's tale has been re-cast and retold as a dazzling patchwork of traditional mythology and contemporary history with a new insight into both.

Thus, using dozens of literary techniques and introducing new journalistic trends in style, Tharoor has made *The Great Indian Novel* an unforgettable work in all literature. Though many critics have written and scholars of research study have estimated it as a postmodern parody, it can be legitimately argued that the parodic aspect as well as the postmodern preoccupation with historiography, magic realism, pun, metaphor, political criticism, positive and negative outlooks on India, all put together, have created the best example of Faction right from the days of Capote and Mailer who started the genre in the sixties.