Abstract:

Shashi Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* is the depiction of post-modern Mahabharata, a rewritten text. Placing Mahabharata, as a main concept, he recounts the text with the contemporary context, by adding incidents and events from the pre- and post-independence India. Using historiographic metafiction and intertextuality he fits the historical characters and events into his narrative he places them equally qualified to the casts from the epic. The antique characters are turned to modern personalization, he is in the position to make certain changes in this rewriting. He names his characters that figures in the Indian epic, Mahabharata and parallels the Indian epic and history in the novel. His choice of mingling history and epic engages the modern readers to reinterpret the text from new parlance. Using this new insight, he satirises the contemporary political and social situation in India, infusing humour and irony to the serious events and happenings, he allows the readers to think outside the text and to connect it with the contemporary India.

Key words: Rewriting, Mahabharata, historiography, metafiction and intertextuality.

Tharoor rewrites the Indian history by mingling it with the great Indian epic, Mahabharata. Like Vyasa’s epic, the novel is also divided into eighteen chapters and its
narrative is filled with multicoloured depiction in a discursive way. His depiction follows the events of Mahabharata and simultaneously from the Indian history, he also extends a new look into the contemporary political situations. Using the elements like intertextuality, historiographic metafiction in the novel he allows the modern readers to derive at different interpretations by placing the text in the contemporary context. He further depicts the important events from Indian history such as, the Salt March, the Indigo Worker’s Strike, the Jallianwallah Bagh Massacre, the conflicts within the congress party, the Quit India movement, the Nehru and Indira Gandhi era, the partition of India, and so on. His choice of portraying such events is to bring the political situation of Indian from then till now. Therefore this rewriting includes selection, deflation, distortion, exaggeration and invention which go beyond the original text that is, “The novel seeks to recover an adequate sense of pride in India’s cultural history and by juxtaposing the past with the present, attempts to show in human terms what happened to us and what have lost” (Biring 133).

As a contemporary writer he includes inversion, distortion and not only creates a new text but chooses to rewrite from the existing old texts. By bringing the characters and events from well-known epic she questions the past, and distorts the events from the myth accordingly to fit his subject and concept of rewriting it from the contemporary panorama as A.S. Rao mentions Tharoor, “... skilfully handles the literary situation in altering, adding, combining and finally shaping them to tell a contemporary story” (62). The novel focuses on past events and personages which the original text, exclude. Those excluded new constructions are foregrounded and retold in an alternative composition. Thus, this rewriting is the form of alternative versions of the past. Tharoor subverts the past events and characters to create an alternative version to it. Offering multiple possibilities to a single possibility frames a new sketch only through the mode of rewriting.

Tharoor brings a modern Kurukshetra with, “a concept which is still committed to the tradition of the new and does not have a complex relation to the past, or pluralism, or the transformation of western culture- a concern with meaning, continuity and symbolism” (Jencks 33-34). Historiographic metafiction paradoxically and ironically interprets the history and destabilizes it to expose the social construction. It do not deny the past but shapes the present using the events in the past, “... those well-known and popular novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages” (Nicol 303). Historiographic metafiction represents the issues in society, political, culture and nation through the use of intertextuality.
He thereby sets his novel in the following ways; Hastinapur is the princely states in pre-independent India. The politics, intriguing and rivalry in the place refers to the congress party of that time. The splitting of Kaurava clan is seen as an anti-imperialist movement, the split is into the hands of congress and muslim league. He takes most of the main events from the epic and turns it logically based on the reality in modern world. For example, the incident where Satyavati asks Vyasa to give heir to the throne in the original epic, he uses this and turns out the incident by depicting Vyasa as a surrogate husband in the novel, who is the main reason for the birth of Dhristarashtra and Pandu. Through this point depicts that India is in need of a leader, after independence. His characterizations are portrayed in a unique way, he portrays Dhristarashtra in the place of Nehru and Duryodhani as Indira Gandhi, and brings out the trace that India’s position is at the hands of congress party. The conflict between India and Britain and also the Hindu-Muslim conflict are turned into the modern construction in his novel. Britain is represented through his characters Drewpad, the Resident Richard and Heaslop. Through Drewpad, he introduces the character Draupadi, and she stands as a symbol of democracy. In the original epic Draupadi is born out of sacrificial fire, whereas in the modern version he depicts Draupadi as an infant girl born to Georgina Drewpad and Dhristarashtra and the couple leaves her at the hands of a poor and a low caste family.

The self-reflexive juxtaposition of the present and the past which Hutcheon talks about in her book, “The Poetics of Postmodernism” refers to the chance of handling historical facts. As Hutcheon believes that contemporary novels are inherently paradoxical and explains it from the binary point. Tharoor makes it possible by bringing two oppositions that is the Indian history and myth at the same time. His The Great Indian Novel is characterized by an inseparably paradoxical side by depicting the amalgamation of Indian history and the myth, Mahabharata. On reading the novel, it not only presents a normative structure but also allows the readers to encounter the author's self-reflexive mind set and complexities in the society. Reading between the hilarious lines, brings out the inner feelings of the author. He uses metafiction as, “...a tendency or function inherent in all novels...” he further proves that it, “...is worth studying... because of the insight it offered into both the representational nature of all fiction and the literary history of the novel as a genre. By studying metafiction, one is, in effect, studying that which gives the novel its identity” (Waugh 5).

He uses his own imagination and interprets unreal correlation between the characters and events from the old epic and the post-independence historical leaders. He combines both Indian history and myth with the present Indian socio-cultural situation. He modifies the
similarities between the myth and history using irony and parody which is an essential feature of historiographic metafiction. He allegorises and depicts different pillars of government in independent India through his characters from the myth, Mahabharata. Myths are becoming an emblematic representation of life. The emblematic use of myth in rewriting detaches values to the readers and simultaneously encourages them to interrogate the current political situation, culture and attitude of modern people. Tharoor choose myth as a form to express his self-reflexive thoughts and view, he understands that the myth has its richness and reflects the contemporary societal problems. In his, “Yoking of myth to history” he comments saying:

. . . the yoking of myth to history restricted some of my fictional operations: as the novel progressed, I was obliged to abandon novelistic conventions and develop characters who were merely walking metaphors. Draupadi, thus, became emblematic of Indian democracy, her attempted disrobing a symbol of what was sought to be done to democracy not so long ago. (7)

The main focus is on restructuring the myth and Tharoor’s attempt is an authentic representation of reality. In a parodic way, his characters represent government and political figures, this creativity is an adherence to social norms and values. In tracing this rewriting, it indicates the ability of transforming the old texts in to a dialogical process; that is making the impossible, possible. Close reading to the novel, indicates Kane’s exploration of reality, in terms of re-configuring the past. He intertextualizes the characters in such a way where the Kauravas in the novel represents congress party who gives separate identity to the Pandavas. Draupadi represents democracy and her five husbands represent the institutions. Tharoor uses this strategy to put forth the ideals of the congress party, Yudhistir represents the judiciary, Bhima who is known for strength represents army, Arjun is the free press, who fights for justice, whereas Nakula and Sahadev represents the services. He attempts to put forth that the mythical and historical characters as archetypes. She changes the process and goes forward to play around the text and tries to suit her context of rewriting the myth, Mahabharata. There are many distortions and deviations to many important events in the novel. Tharoor ignores many important incidents in his rewriting. T.N.Dhar identifies such deviations and clears that:

Some deviations from the original also become inevitable. For example, there are no one hundred Kauravas; Priya Duryodhani has to
represent them all with a changed sex. The parentage of the Pandavas in the narrative mismatches with the original. Adjustments in theme-scheme and sequel ordering of events also become necessary. Relating the epic to the actualities of history also produced awkward incongruities. For example, in Tharoor’s version, Yudhistir has to share power for sometime with Duryodhani, which is unimaginable in the original. Ganagji has to die before he witnesses the disrobing of Draupadi. (210-11)

Tharoor’s interpretation on characterization is such one, “in which the form of fiction serve as the material upon which further forms may be imposed” (Gass 25), it becomes difficult for the readers to locate the characters identity by paralleling both the Indian history and myth. His self-reflexive portrayal of characterization challenges the text and deconstructs the reader’s relationship with the text. Thus, characterization in the novel leads to multiple interpretations but it brings a clear depiction of each character without any ambiguity. The major character of the epic, Bhishma who is also known as Gangaputra becomes Gangaji in the novel. He uses suffix “ji” to him who represents Gandhiji, from Indian history. He portrays him as the regent of Hastinapur, who assists the other leaders and guides them towards independence. Both Gandhi and Bhisma posses similarity at certain situations, one of the notable is the latter fails to stop the Kurukshetra war, whereas the former fails to prevent the partition in India. He further describes the modern Gangaji with humour, “. . . the man in charge of Hastinapur for all practical purposes, thin as a papaya plant, already balder then than I am today, peering at you through round- rimmed glasses that give him the look of a startled owl” (32).

Tharoor using intertextuality not only modifies the important events from history but also from the myth, the story of avenging Amba. For example, he alters this incident as Gandhi’s assassination and Amba becomes Godse in the novel. He evokes this through dream narration where he claims, “I have had nightmares about that moment since, and in my nightmares the Mahaguru fell, pierced not by bullets but by arrows, sharp shafts that cut deeply into his body and his being” (326). After the death of Gangaji, in the novel, Arjun brings water for him from river Ganga, whereas in the original epic Arjun hits the ground with his arrow and water gushes up. Tharoor depicts this scene of giving water to Bheeshma at the hour of death from his own self-reflexive style and thus it stands appealing to the readers of contemporary India.
On describing his characters Dhristarashtra and his wife Gandhari, Tharoor proves himself as an ingenious. Dhristarashtra represents Nehru, instead of throwing light on Nehru’s era the author criticizes him in a line where he claims Dhristarashtra, as the adoptive father of Draupadi, who left her empty-handed. Nehru’s ill wife resembles Gandhari from the myth, Tharoor in the episode of introducing Gandhari wilfully neglects her blind foldness, and unlike the original epic she gives birth to a daughter instead of hundred sons. He depicts this ironically saying, “Your daughter, Gandhari... will be equal to a thousand sons. This I promise you” (90). His use of characterization is unique, she not only uses intertextuality, but also lampoons his characters in the novel. As he weaves the characters of epic and history into a single modern fabric significantly enough that, “the archetypal names that Tharoor uses are loaded with meaning and once these names are applied to the ordinary mortals of the modern age the result is farcical” (Tripathi 123).

The other main characters reposed from the mythology to history is Karna, Tharoor reinterprets him in a totally divergent way, from the myth. He introduces Karna in the chapter, “The Son also Rises” which draws attention to the fact of the myth that is Karna is the son of the sun God. In the epic, when Karna appears and proves his prowess a charioteer rushes in and addresses him as his son, whereas in this rewriting a durwan rushes and claims that a man in driver’s uniform is waiting to see Karna and claims to be his father. At this point Dhristarashtra merely puts his words, “A driver’s son has been lecturing on the unsuitability of the masses” (187) whereas in the original epic, at this juncture Karna befriends Duryodhana and so Dhristarashtra supports him. But in Tharoor’s version, there is antagonism and rivalry bursts between Dhristarashtra and Karna. Tharoor thereby, transforms the historical political partition in to the myth, Karna here represents modern Jinnah who brings separate state for muslims. He fuses sterling qualities to his novel by bringing such an innovative transformation. The splendid self-reflexive inventiveness of Tharoor to the past is evident in most part of his rewriting:

Not only in the yoking of myth to contemporary reality but in the very selection of historical events for dramatization... The novel does not, therefore, provide an interpretation of reality in terms of myth, it only parodies myth in terms of contemporary facts- a method which is at times felt to be forced, arbitrary, contrived and artificial with the result that parallelisms tend to be unconvincing or seem to crumble at certain crucial points. (Rajan 27-28)
The modern depiction in paralleling myth and history throws light on the contemporary reality. At certain points in portraying Karna, Tharoor exploits hatred relationship among brothers, instead he concentrates on Hindu and Muslims partition of that time. Karna is represented as the muslim leader Jinnah, he thus becomes the Mohammad Ali Karna in the text and his state becomes Karnistan, instead of Pakistan. He gives him a fair and glowing complexion and a golden crescent mark on his forehead, by replacing Karna’s gold ornaments and armour from the myth, Mahabharata. Jinnah’s political strategy is similar to that of Tharoor’s description of Karna. For instance, Jinnah takes his own efforts to sustain in politics and finally gains it, the same way Karna fights with his own efforts to gain identity in the original epic. Both Karna and Jinnah have self-esteem in common and thus Tharoor parallels each other using intertextuality. At the early stage of life both Karna and Jinnah faced failures, Tharoor’s selection of portraying Karna as Jinnah fits appropriately in his modern version of kurukshetra. He portrays Karna as a lawyer and a good orator, and his speech at the working committee goes powerful which is similar to that of Jinnah’s speeches. Tharoor thus puts it as powerfully as Jinnah speech, “We cannot hope to rule ourselves by leading mobs of people who are ignorant of the desideratum of self-rule. Populism and demagoguery do not move parliaments, my friends. Breaking the law will not help us to make the law one day” (186).

In the depiction of Karna, Tharoor’s innovation is unrivalled. The idea of combining Karna and Jinnah is unimaginable, but Tharoor makes it possible, “...attributing Karna’s characteristics to Jinnah is a grossly infantile venture” (Tripathi 123). He reinterprets the death of Karna from modern eyesight, infusing humour. He never misses his continuity in bringing the mythical background. Simultaneously, he fictionalizes both the Indian history and the Indian myth with his self-reflexivity by adding wit and irony to his new concept in bringing out modern kurukshetra, which depicts the ongoing situation in the present day to the modern readers.

In the original Mahabharata Karna’s chariot gets stuck in the mud and when he tries to extricate it, Arjuna’s arrow hit him, whereas coming to Tharoor’s version he puts it with irony and there comes a strong humourous depiction saying, “Seems his official vehicle got stuck in the mud somewhere on an inspection tour. ... so nervous he revved the engine too strongly and got the wheel embedded even more deeply in the mud” (392) and further he depicts that, “he apparently actually tugged at the wheel which didn’t budge. ... he shook his fist at the sun” (393). Tharoor skips depicting about the friendship between Duryodhana and
Karna in his new version of modern kurukshetra. Hence, in this rewriting Duryodhana becomes Duryodhani, who after the death of Karna positions as the Prime Minister of India. Thus, The mythical character Duryodhana is given new interpretation in this depiction of modern kurukshetra, “The characters of the epic are made to re-live their lives in the pre- and post- independent India” (Kumar n.p).

Manifesting an abundance use self-reflexive imagination the novel suggests that Tharoor self consciously presents the Indian history and myth from metafictional dimensions. The reader is pleased to go through the lines, he not only uses inversion, distortion, parody and pastiche in the rewriting but also a variety of characterization and narrativity. The novel is highly connotative and captures the attention of the readers by leaving intense impression on their minds. Thus, the novel differs from other contemporary novels, “. . . postmodernist fiction differs from modernist fiction just as a poetics dominated by ontological issues differs from one dominated by epistemological issues” (Mchale 12).

Tharoor also shifts Drona’s identity from the myth, he fits him to his historical context. After independence, he becomes the Minister of state for administrative reforms. Here he fights with Heaslop, the British Viceroy in the novel. Drewpad, the foe of Drona in original myth, shifts his identity as Heaslop in modern version, who was trying to obtain compensation for the loss of property during partition, but Drona interrupts and arranges for an interview. Tharoor at this point brings in the role of Draupad and Drona, he skilfully shifts their entire role from the original epic and this rewriting turns out to be a new idea where Drona and Draupad were friends earlier and the latter have humiliated the former. Now as a Minister, Drona faces Heaslop in an interview and throws his red face to him saying, “Amazing what adversity will do for the memory cells” (335), the interview soon turns into cross examination. Heaslop claims that he lost his property during a riot and he was asleep by the time. Drona fiercely questions:

And you were asleep? A major riot between two sections of His Majesty’s subjects in your district, and you, Mr Heaslop, were sleeping? You surprise me, Shri Heaslop. I would have seen you instead in your official jeep, restoring law and order and sanity to the population. That would have been your . . . “service-related function”, would it not?’. (337)

Heaslop in few second realizes his mistake and apologizes to the minister. Drona then passes the order to transfer Heaslop to Delhi with gratitude, “Heaslop rose, stretched out his
hand, and found the minister’s palms folded in a polite but correct Namaste. Clumsily, he retracted his own and mirrored the gesture” (340). Tharoor mingles Drona and Draupad scene from the myth with humour and satire, giving it a historical value. In original myth Drona captures half of Draupad’s land and avenges him, whereas in Tharoor’s version, Drona insults Heaslop with ironical statement and fulfils his quench for revenge. Tharoor uses pastiche in his work for example, his character Heaslop is from Forster’s *A Passage to India* he is embedded as kind Draupad from the myth. As M.K.Choudhury puts it:

E.M. Foster is another novelist whom Tharoor had constantly in mind for obvious reasons. Rony Heaslop reappears in the novel as a representative of the colonial rule, contemptuous of the natives and is shown as being paid back in the same coin after Indian independence.

Tharoor’s: *Passage through India*, title of one of the books of the novel, turns the table on *Passage to India* but it should not be forgotten that Tharoor too tries to create passages at certain places, as it is shown later, he echoes Forster. (106)

The death of Drona in Tharoor’s rewriting sounds like a mock-epic. In the original epic, Drona supports Duryodhana even though he favours the Pandavas. Because, his son Aswathamma always stands at Duryodhana’s side, with no other option Drona stands along, whereas in Tharoor’s rewriting Drona goes against Priya Duryodhani, Jaiprakash Drona in the novel is a link to the historical character Jaiprakash Narayan of the sarvodaya movement. In the novel, Ashwathaman is in Duryodhani’s camp, and Drona is told that the plane carrying Ashwathaman had crashed. Suspecting Drona, asks to the righteous Yudhistir, “Tell me Yudhistir, is it true? I cannot believe it unless it comes from you. Tell me, is Ashwathaman safe” (592), Yudhistir claims, “I am” (592). Drona gives his life away, later when Vyasa accuses Yudhistir for saying lie, he says, “when I said Ashwathaman was dead, I was speaking the truth. Before leaving the house I caught a cockroach in the closet, named it Ashwathaman, and crushed it . . . I never said it was his son who had died” (594), whereas in the original epic, Yudhistir explains that an elephant called Ashwathaman was dead. Tharoor here mockingly turns an elephant into a cockroach which really shocks Drona suspecting that his son Ashwathaman is dead and he gives up his life.

The important character who is given a twirl twist in Tharoor’s version is Ekalavya. For instance, in the original epic, Ekalavva becomes an expert archer than Arjuna just by

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watching Drona teaching the Pandavas. When Drona finds this decides to ask for his thumb finger as a fee the poor Ekalavya who is not a Kshatriya without any hesitation cuts off his thumb and places it at Drona’s feet. Unlike the epic, in the novel Ekalavya is the son of a maid, scores higher mark in the exam than Arjun, Drona demands his thumb finger as a fee but the poor boy rejects to pay. Through this Tharoor depicts that the people of low class in the twentieth century are becoming aware of their rights with better opportunities for education. Tharoor distorts Jaiprakash Narayan’s identification at this point, in reality he is the one who fights for rural and poor people whereas in the novel he dismisses a poor boy, who wishes to acquire education. In the depiction of Ekalavya, Tharoor distorts the original history and brings awareness to the modern readers. He exposes the defects of the elite class in Indian society, and proves that the old practice is not conductive to the present day:

Tharoor write the Mahabharata twice. Once without changing ground where he is faithful to the original plot and episodes to the epic. Then he writes against it, that is from a twentieth century perspective. This method is tellingly exemplified in the scene where the modern day Drona orders Ekalavya to cut off his thumb and give to him as fee for having eavesdropped and there by having tied with Arjun for the first place. Thus far the scene is true to the spirit of the original episode. But then Tharoor writes against the scene with the modern day Ekalavya defying Drona and pragmatically refusing to gift him a chopped of thumb. (Narayan 47)

Tharoor brings out the tyrannical act of Duryodhana and Shakuni in depicting modern kurukshetra. The Kurukshetra war here turns out to be the election. When Duryodhani calls for election, the majority of people are on the Pandavas side, Krishna’s role is enigmatic at this point. He is the secretary of the Gokarna’s people party, called as Parthasarathy the charioteer, who served as Arjuna’s charioteer during the war, in the original myth. Tharoor employs a startling innovation to subvert his characterization of Krishna in the modern version. As T.N. Dhar puts it, “Though Tharoor manages to fit the main events and personalities of pre- and post-independence India with the plot outline of the main narrative. There is no special place for Krishna in the account. . . performs the retrial of giving a short spiritual discourse to him” (215). His verse to Arjun in the myth, is humoured here as the strategies of electioneering. Tharoor mixes the myth with history using self-reflexivity he depicts it as, Duryodhani loses in the election and the Pandavas win, the people keeps dancing spontaneously. Vyasa feels that the election is demoralised, he says “Something had
passed whose shadow would always remain, and something had begun that would not endure . . . collected tyrant with an indeterminate collection of tyros” (582). Thus, Tharoor reinterprets both the history and the myth in the election scene. When an enthusiastic young journalist asks Vyasa about the election and says it is like Kurukshetra battlefield, Vyasa erupts, “I hope not, I barked, ‘because there were no victors at Kurukshetra . . . there was good and bad, dishonour and treachery, betrayal and death, on both sides. There was no glorious victory at Kurukshetra” (564-565). He also explains:

Young man . . . You must understand one thing. This election is not Kurukshetra; life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between dharma and adharma is a struggle our nation, and each of us in it, engages in our every single day of our existence. That struggle, that battle, took place before this election; it will continue after it (565).

The novel exemplifies, modern Kurukshetra through the mode historiographic metafiction and throws light on the problem between the facts and fictions and highlights the construction of the novel based on contemporary issues. The mixing of history within fictional reality, makes the reader to view the novel from different parlance. Tharoor replaces the myth and recreates a new work to the readers. He weaves the incidents from Vyasa’s Mahabharata and patches it with her fictitious idea to bring an autonomous and self-reflexive new work to the past. Writers like Kane, Pattanaik, Divakaruni, Neelakantan chooses the mode of rewriting the absolute history and myth whereas the other writers proceeds with the official history. Tharoor blunts and transgresses the history with his own fictionality, and inserts historical events and characters with the mythical events and characters. Thus the novel stands, “contrast, seeks to foreground this seam . . . by visibly contradicting the public record of official history, by flaunting anachronism; and by integrating history and the fantastic” (McHale 90). This reworking of Tharoor is to be viewed from a totally divergent panorama by connecting it to the current situation. Parody in the novel, demystifies the serious tone of the epic in a grandiose facet. The novel is to be eulogised by the readers, Tharoor’s sparkling words and verse serves a better comprehensive to the readers in a humorous way. He portrays the concept of similarities between Indian myth and Indian history using his self-reflexivity and thus brings a modern Kurukshetra to the forefront.
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