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## The Adaption of Self-Reflexivity and Metafiction Approach to Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's the Great Indian Novel: A Post-Modernist Study

### Abstract

*Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel is an example of a post-modern historiographic metafiction that takes the relationship between reality and fiction into consideration. This novel also depicts the 20th century political past by reviving events, incidents and characters of the myth of Mahabharata. The current paper aims to explain how Tharoor rebuilds the twentieth-century past by drawing on the great Mahabharata classical epic. Additionally, it examines the common relationship between fiction and history as it progressed along and continuous processes through the use of self-reflexivity and metafiction approach. In The Great Indian Novel, Tharoor adapts a metafiction tool which is the most fitting way to tackle this novel as a postmodernist study. Tharoor blends fiction and fact through a self-reflective narrative and the use of several metafiction devices by adapting the myth of Mahabharata to construct the distance between the past and the present. Tharoor takes the ancient myth as the basic structure with contemporary group of political characters for a real and ironic review of recent Indian history and representation.*

**Keywords:** Postmodernism, Self-Reflexivity, Metafiction, Myth, and The Great Indian Novel.

### Introduction

The Great Indian Novel is a satirical tale of Indian history from the 20th century, in a mythological style borrowed from the Mahabharat. It provides a strong counter-history of India with its oral storytelling techniques, basic form of myth, and metafictional devices. It challenges the imperialist and official version of history and tries to bring forward in fictional form the alternative indigenous historical interpretation of reality. In the Indian scene, fictional works can be classified as postmodern- metafiction

emerged both after and before Tharoor's work. For example, Aravind Adiga's *The White Tiger* (2008) Salman Rushie's *Midnight's Children* (1981), and Chaman Nahal's *Azadi* (1975), all belong to the mentioned genre. Shashi Tharoor is certainly one of the major writers of Indian English fiction whose innovative narrative styles and inventive use in fiction of the elements of myth and history, widely define postmodern life and fiction. Postmodern fiction is characterized by adapting and counting upon a wide variety of

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techniques and narrative style involving self-reflexivity and metafiction.

Metafiction is divided into two words "Meta" means "beyond," so metafiction means beyond fiction. Metafiction is one of the postmodernist stylistic techniques, many postmodernist authors describe this technique in their writing. It's an attempt to make the reader aware of the fanciful aspect that they're reading (Sheeba, 2017, p.183). Patricia Waugh describes metafiction in a form that sums up the characteristics of this type of writing:

"Metafiction is a term given to fictional writing which self-consciously and systematically draws attention to its status as an artefact in order to pose questions about the relationship between fiction and reality. In providing a critique of their own methods of construction, such writings not only examine the fundamental structures of narrative fiction, they also explore the possible fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text". (Waugh, 1984, p.2)

Some of the most popular Indian English novels of the time fall into the classification of "historiographic metafiction," this word is connected by the theoretician Linda Hutcheon who describes it as "novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge" (1987, p. 285); she also defines this term as Known and popular novels both deeply self-reflexive and yet ironically lay claim to historical characters and events (1996, p. 5). Hutcheon states that historiographic metafiction disprove the methods of distinguishing between fiction and historical fact which are natural or common sense. This rejects the idea that only history has a claim to reality, both by challenging the basis of that argument in historiography and by arguing that history and fiction are discourses, structures, human constructs, and both derive their great argument to reality from that identity. (1996, p. 93) Historiographic metafiction often poses concerns about positivist and fictional realist historiography-writing, and makes concerted attempts to simplify and even problematize the recording process.

Self-reflexivity is a term used to refer to literary works that focus freely on their own artful compositional processes. Such self-referentiality is also seen in modern fictional works that frequently reference their own fictional status. (www.oxfordreference.com). Metafiction often uses experimental and unconventional techniques by rejecting traditional plots, subverting conventions to turn 'fact' into a highly suspicious idea, by exaggerating and revealing the foundations of their instability and by

showing reflexivity that helps the reader to know the processes by whom he reads the world as texts. (Waugh, 1984, p. 5)

In the experimental novel, the emphasis is placed on characters and random thinking. It does not involve the action of characters, and it is rather linked to the language of the novel for representing the characters' innermost feelings, so the reader can plunge into the characters' mind. The function and role of history and myth in defining the political, cultural and ideological aspects of a post-independence nation and its subjects are constantly being challenged by Shashi Tharoor. In his attempts to describe the fragmented and ambiguous, the pluralistic meaning of collective as well as individual identity in postmodern space and time, he seeks to question and restructure the forms of historiography and mythmaking. Shashi Tharoor is certainly one of Indian English fiction's main significant figures whose unconventional narrative styles and experimental use of the myth and history conventions in fiction have widely defined postmodern perspective of the literature and life. His novel is a popular postmodernist texts that use India's mythology and political past and subverts it in the process. Returns to Historiographic metafiction in "The Great Indian Novel", to adopt and adapt the epic of Mahabharata. Tharoor draws upon the ancient myth as the basic structure and filled it with contemporary group of political characters for ironic and serious representation of recent Indian history.

### ***The Employment of Self-reflexivity and Metafiction Approach to Myth and History in Shashi Tharoor's The Great Indian Novel***

The first novel by Shashi Tharoor, *The Great Indian Novel* (1989), is classified into eighteen books. The novel itself provides a modern revision of the ancient Mahabharata, transformed into a modern India tale. The book is dictated to the scribe Ganapathi, by the old politician, Ved Vyas. It tells the story of Hastinapur's struggle for independence, led by the holy and clever Mahaguru Gangaji (Mahatma Gandhi), his famous Mango March (Salt March) and the birth of Indian democracy as a result of the passionate combination of a blind nationalist (Jawaharlal Nehru) and a British emperor (Lady Mountbatten). Other major characters are Karna (Md. Ali Jinnah), the Muslim leader who is calling for and achieving the country's partition, and Pandu the Pale (Subhash Chandra Bose), who is seeking Japanese help to free India. This period of complex family politics leads to the post-independence struggle for dominance between the Duryodhani (Indira Gandhi) and

Pandavas, the only 'Kaurava' from the pages of The Mahabharata that Duryodhan had 99 brothers. The book (combining vivid prose with light verse) is not only an important first novel but also a major milestone of Indian English literature in the 20th century, written with much elegance and humor. (Piciuccio, 2004, p.374)

The Mahabharata story presents the novel with the basic form in which Tharoor suits a twentieth-century Indian history, starting with Mahatma Gandhi's returning in 1915 to India and ending in 1980 with Indira who was considered as Gandhi's second premiership. The narrator of the book, Ved Vyas, was directly involved in the political life and then dictates the story to a scribe, like the assumed composer of the Mahabharata. History is the main aspect in The Great Indian Novel as it is depicted in the novel throughout the use of fiction, myth, and satire. Tharoor carefully creates parallelism between the political history of today and Mahabharata. (Great Indian Novel Is An Attempt English Literature Essay)

Postmodernist metafiction has the characteristics of paradox, self-reflexivity, open endedness, intertextuality, provisionality, subjectivity, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and irony. Such features can be seen in this novel. "The Great Indian Novel" has its inter-textuality, which makes use of actual events (historical and political), prevalent epics and mythologies like the Mahabharata, and the thoughts of actual characters as inter-text. Refusing to settle the story, Tharoor evokes his narrator Ved Vyas in the novel, when he says that Tharoor did not start the story to finish it; the story purpose lies in the tale. (TGIN, 1993, p.162)

There are other aspects of Metafiction in this novel, which problematizes the entire concept of subjectivity; the actions in the novel are narrated by a dominant narrator. High level of subjectivity in postmodern fiction has contributed to self-reflexivity by the author, which has also been a prominent subject. In this novel there is a desire to close the distance between the present and the past and also a desire to rewrite the past in a new way (Krishnaiah, 2015, p.3). Ved Vyas tells a subjective story of Indian history dating from the 20th century, focused on his own experiences. Ved Vyas freely states the subjectivity of his narrative and at the same time indicates that all historical narratives are subjective:

"It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji's truth, and the fight to be rid of both the British and the Hindu was Karna's truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities? Question, Ganapathi. Is it

permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun? Questions two and three. How much may one select, interpret and arrange facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy?" (TGIN, 1993, p.50)

Such metafictional works indicate, as Linda Hutcheon said, that there are only facts in the plural, but not one truth; and that there is seldom falsehood per se, just other facts (1987, p. 290). Parodying is a very crucial element of postmodern metafiction, which is performed not to erase the past but rather to consecrate and question the past. Tharoor, in his novel, reflects the features of the historiographic metafiction of postmodernism which is problematizing history. Investigating its characteristics, Balaswamy (1998) says that "historiographic metafictional works problematize history, by portraying historical events and personalities only, to subvert them" (229). The writer seeks to re-interpret the past in fiction so that it can be opened up to present, thus keeping the past from being teleological and conclusive. Ved Vyas's comment to his scholar shows an alternate way of seeing life and history when he said that there is no end to the life story, and the end is the teller's arbitrary invention. After all, the end of today is but the beginning of tomorrow (TGIN, 1993, p. 54). Ved Vyas tends to indicate that because history itself is not teleological and conclusive, narrative stories cannot be so either, and so question the suitability of the expert-narrative of European history to at only the Indian context. The incomplete essence of writing history is illustrated when he thinks he has said it at the end of his narrative from a totally incorrect viewpoint, and thus need to start over again. (TGIN, 1993, p. 55)

The protagonists are proper types in the historiographical metafiction; they are the oppressed and the marginal figures in fictional history. Tharoor uses a particular myth to underline exactly the same postmodern tendencies. The mythical tool of Tharoor has been used here that it gives him the same expression, the same provisionalism, and eclecticism that would have given multiple intertextuality. For the purposes of irony and parody, Tharoor employs his pretext to destroy the myths about the past. The Mahabharata's kind of intertextuality makes Tharoor use and misuse the intertextual echoes, inscribing their strong allusions and subverting the strength through irony.

Tharoor has shown an excellent matching ability in making the Mahabharata characters walk, speak, behave, procreate and die in India's contemporary setting, before and after its independence. The novel's opening and closing

chapters loosely correspond to the events and characters portrayed in the episodes of the opening and closing of the epic, the tracing of the Kauravas and Pandavas tree, and the Yudhishtira's tripto heaven and hell followed by his dog. This shows Tharoor's genius in employing the characters of the in modern way.(Great Indian Novel Is An Attempt English Literature Essay. No p.)

In Great Indian Novel, the re-presentation of the historical characters of Indian history can be seen as another aspect of metafiction. In the Mahabharata Bhishma, he is revived in the novel as Mahaguru Gangaji portrays Mahatma Gandhi. Bhishma takes a vow during his life to remain a celibate to satisfy the wish of his father Shantanu to marry a fisherwoman, Satyawathi. At age 45, Gandhi makes a decision to practice sexual self-restraint as Bhishma did. Gandhi prefers normal and easy life. His practices are generally called Gandhian fads, such as nature therapy, vegetarianism. Tharoor explains Gandhi's same way of life in an absurd way subversive:

"Thin as a papaya plant...peering at you through round-rimmed glasses that gave him the look of a startled owl. And the rest of his appearance was hardly what you would call prepossessing. He had by then burned hissoop-and-fish and given away the elegant suits copied for him from the best British magazines by the court master-tailor; but to makematters worse, he was now beginning to shed part or most of even his traditional robes on all but state occasion.(TGIN, 1993, p .35)

As the narrator makes parenthetical observations, the subversive and parodic element inevitably crawls in. The sense of parody and irreverence also accompanies the accounts of Mahatma Gandhi's many heroic achievements. Tharoor continues to refer to the weirdness of Gandhiji, Gandhiji's activity of giving himself enema. British people are calling Gangaji Public Enema as Number one, parsimony his loincloth dress amongst other. Such attempts to subvert or puncture existing pictures, without any malevolent motives, are considered from the category of historiographic metafiction of installing the past just to challenge it. In the narrative Gandhi acts as the critical connection between the present and the past by "immersing himself increasingly in the great works of the past and the present, reading Vedas and Tolstoy with equal involvement, studying the innumerable laws of Manu and the eccentric philosophy of Ruskin".(TGIN, 1993,p. 25)

Dhritarashtra, Hastinapur's blind king, represents India's first prime minister, the idealist, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had been

ignorant to many facts around him. Tharoor pours into subjectivity in the depiction of Dhritarashtra in true postmodernist way that robs off any offensiveness. Similarly, the rewriting of Subhash Chandra Bose's position as Pandu is composed of physical information combined with historical events. Faithful to his fictional counterpart, Pandu rebels against Gangaji's authority and attempts to strike him alone by fleeing to Japan and Germany.It portrays the blind Dhritarashtra as Jawaharlal Nehru. Kauravas's mother Queen Gandhari gives birth to Priya Duryodhani equal to the power of hundreds of evil sons. Priya Duryodhani stands for Indira Gandhi.

Mahabharata fictional figure, Mohammed Ali Jinnah's portrayal as Mohammed Ali Karna, the magnificent and golden-skinned barrister, was yet another successful use of parody. Karna's single-minded desire to be free of the Hindus' hegemony paves the way for Karnistan (Pakistan) creation. Looking at the other questions briefly, there Tharoor indulges in another postmodernist fashion: the gender transition, and then Kashmir was Marmir; Siddhartha Shankar Ray as Shakuni Shankar Roy, Jayaprakash Narayan as Jayaprakash Drona, and Bangla Desh as Gelabi Desh. The most subverted and reversed character was Draupadi Mokras, representing 'democracy' as a result of Dhritarashtra's union with Viscount Drewpad's wife, Lady Georgina Drewpad who retained control over the country's division, born on January 26, 1950, so cleverly referred to by the narrator as Draupadi Mokras (Tiwari, 2019 ,p.120-158).The epic framework subversions were performed honestly, creatively and meaningfully.

In addition to its massive and mythical structure, the novel exhibits much shrewd and incredible intertextuality. Most names of his eighteen books (interestingly based on the Bhagwat Gita's eighteen chapters and the Mahabharata's eighteen volumes) through their and clever and fantastical links to other literary texts belong to the postmodernist standards. The protagonist of the story Ved Vyas, Ganapathi is the scribe, as the epic has it. The entire story is performed in first-person to the present story, Ganapathi, with numerous narrator interferences, harangues, reminiscences, diversions, etc. that undoubtedly places the novel in the class of metafiction. The self-reflexiveness is illustrated at the beginning of each book, most notably in Yudhishtir's last episode of entering heaven. The narrator lapses from poetry to prose and meter, again self-reflexivity, saying that the subject under discussion often needs sophistry, often bathos. Another metafictional device that Tharoor uses

very effectively is "self-referentiality," which is also to be found clearly in the speech of Ved Vyas when he said that for every story that he has told and every view that he has expressed, there are hundred equally relevant options that he has excluded and he is refusing to apologize for this .he said that every Indian should carry his own Indian history forever with him in his heart and head. (TGIN, 1993, p. 373)

The story starts with the state of Hastinapur and its opposition to the British and passes rapidly through periods of freedom struggle like the massacre of Jallianwala Bagh {Bibigarh Garden massacre}, the uprising of farmers and industrial workers, Gandhi's march {Great Mango march}and partition, Independence and the gloomy time of Emergency and its effects . Tharoor re-presents the peasant movement with reverence for Gandhiji, "Imagine it for yourself, Ganapathi, frail, bespectacled Gangaji defying the might of the British Empire, going from village to village proclaiming the right of the people to live rather than grow dye ". (TGIN,1993, p .51)

Apparently, Tharoor has represented the civil disobedience campaign, this historic battle as 'The Great Mango March' to pull the "forbidden fruit" in the book, humorously parodying Gandhi's great achievement: "The Crowd cheered, and yelled, and swarmed around Gangajias he stepped off the platform. The mango he had plucked, that first fruit of India's liberation, was instantly auctioned to enthusiastic acclaim, for the prince Lysum of sixteen hundred rupees"(TGIN,1993, p.124).Tharoor represents the massacre of Jallianwallah Bagh as Bibigarh Garden or Hastinapur Massacre considering the sombre day in the history of the fight for liberty. He also re-presents a Hindu fanatic's assassination of the nation's Father in the mythical tale of the death of mahaguru Bheeshma. He reveals the power-hungry essence of Jinnah and Nehru who refuses Gandhi's advice to give Jinnah the premiership to keep India together.

Tharoor contrasts the abuse of power by Priya Duryodhani in the Emergency with the episode of 'disrobing Draupadi' in the epic, which represents denuding the Indians' dignity of independence. Vedvyas complains that Pirya Duryodani was empowered "to prohibit, proscribe, profane, prolate, prosecute or prostitute, all the freedoms the national movement had fought to attain during all those years of my Kaurava life" (TGIN, 1993, p.357). Vedvyas argues that ancient politics or epic battle such Kurukshetra are intended for worthy causes, whereas politics is driven by money making and selfishness in modern India. He laments that "Today's India is a land of

adulteration, black-marketing, corruption, communal strife, dowry killings, you know the rest, and that this is the only India that matters." (TGIN, 1993, p.412)

Therefore, the Great Indian Novel stands for the India's recent political history in the costume of a mythical story. This is turned into a historiographic metafiction with skilfully integrated, ever-changing thematic form The holocaust of the 1947 partition, the excessive of the emergency as well as its advantages, the compulsions which led Karna to look for the partition of India, the euphoric formed by the non-violent stir of Gangaji are the other times, among others, when the clearly controlling narrator stumbles, declares eloquently in greater degrees of self-reflexivity. The Great Indian Novel thus introducing many features of the historiography metafiction is problematizing the Indian history. There are as many interpretations of what occurred during the partition and the Emergency period and the war for independence, as there are deconstructions of the above. The narrator portrayed in the novel may or may not have been a portrayal of what actually happened. The narrator was involved in certain cases, an ex-cantered individual, but he appears to know what occurred in situations where he is not involved. The narrator presented in these places, who holds the narrator's tendency to problematise history, is also made one of the metafictionist instruments of subversions in his dreams The narrator declares that sometimes the dreams allow him to see truth more precisely. (TGIN, P 383).

## Conclusion

The Great Indian Novel is a tale of nationalism and also an effort to subvert the dominant narratives of history, politics and myths. This feature makes it a historiographic metafiction. Tharoor used many metafiction devices such as parody, intertextuality, mixing of genre, indeterminacy, the narrator involved in the story, self-reflexivity, open endedness, provisionally subjectivity, discontinuity, indeterminacy, and Irony (Tiwari, 2019, p.119). Tharoor uses the epic as a tool for his ideas. In the process of satirizing, he does not want to illustrate the epic as a great narrative and thus makes his work a historiographic metafiction that also subverts the epic, using the epic itself.

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