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A STUDY POLITICAL AND HISTORICAL ISSUES TAKEN UP IN SASHITHAROOR'S FICTION

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Sahi Tharoor's has written, *The Great Indian Novel*, in 1989, it is his maiden work of fiction, gave him fame when it got published. In this novel, he attaches fiction with politics and myth to reality in a masterful way. It vastly entertains, yet broadens the reader's understanding of India's political culture and history. He presents the real and colourful history of 20th century Indian politics with the great Hindu epic *The Mahabharata* in a suspicious tone that leaves the need gasping at his boldness. He blends poetry and prose in a style that helps him shift from serious and sublime moods to the highly ridiculous. Tharoor makes fun of both the British and Indians in the novel. He says that nobody is above comment and there is no problem in identifying the characters he parodies from the era of India's independence struggle and the partition of Pakistan. There are also profound and poignant lessons about the Indian experience that can be applied to people and nations across the globe. There is no clearcut demarcation between myth, history and reality - the whole novel is like a rich tapestry with the reality of Indian politics and history woven together with the epic and mythical threads of *The Mahabaratha*.

Among the tributes published on the back flap, by the spirited Indian daily, the Indian Express which declared that "Every sane Indian should buy this book"! The book seems to be a combination of Hindu myth and modem history. Form the Mahabharata point of view it is probably the earliest account of the struggle for power and control. It is the story of the great war of

Kurukshetra between the Pandavas and the Kauravas–the story of the war to establish the right over the Indian throne. Underlying it is the eternal conflict of Dharma versus Adharma. *The Great Indian Novel* is also a political novel. The author through the voice of Ved Vyas takes the reader through the major events that shaped India's destiny in the period that eventually culminated in freedom from the British. The second half of the book deals with the rise of independent India and the woman who ruled her. It takes the characters out of the Mahabharata, paints them with unmistakable traits of modem Indian politicians and put them in the process. One of the strengths of the novel lies in the unconventional narrative structure that the writer has come up with, successfully. This fact has been highlighted and justified by the writer also who defines novel as a literary genre in which one can always bring some kind of novelty. Tharoor himself is a great experimentalist and, therefore, it does not seem very surprising that he has tried his hand on a very unconventional-structure.

A king must make it clear
That in his realm he is boss;
Nobody else, though near dear,
May inflict on him a loss

A king must show his might
Even against kith and kin;
It does not matter he is right
But he must see to win.

There is not much point in being strong
If no one sees your strength
A tiger shows power all along
length His striped and muscular (p.271).

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As was the case with the Mahabharata, *The Great Indian Novel* is being narrated by a Mr. Ved Vyas or V.Vji as he is more commonly known, to a big nosed South Indian by the name of Ganapati. The Mahabharata's indomitable Bhishma earlier known as Gangaputra is the central character in this book. Loin clad, bald headed, Gangaji as he is known in the book, is a most humorous cross between the patriarch of the Mahabharata, the man who began it all and Gandhi ji, the father of modem India. Dhritarashtra is Gangaji's protege within the Kaurava Party (the congress party), his heir apparent, and the nation's golden boy Oxford educated and suave, the author leaves no doubts as to his modern day equivalent–he is none other than Jawaharlal Nehru with Gandhari the Grim as the ailing, all suffering Kamala Nehru.

Cut to the scene of Gandhari in labour-images of lightening and torrential rain, jackals baying in the jungle and vultures circling the skies and amidst all this cacophony, Gandhari gives birth to a daughter. They name her Priya Duryodhani. VVji proclaims to disappointed Gandhari (who had been expecting a 100 sons) that her daughter shall one day grow up to rule the nation. And Indira Priyadarshni Nehru has just been introduced. Some of the really funny ones apart from Gangaji and Priya D are – as Nehru's political nemesis, Mohammed Ali Karnah (Jinnah), ManiMir (Cash Mir), Snuping, the capital of Chakra.

The Mahabharata stands out for its discussions on human behaviour and its general philosophy. Tharoor does not let us down either. VVji often pauses in the midst of his dialogue to reflect on the events he had just narrated to his scribe. The world was not made by a tranquil wave of smooth occurrences but by accidents, emergencies and mishaps. The cosmos is moving from one crisis to the other and the process is constantly being reshaped. The forces of destiny are unshaken and continue their course unheeding of the events that may occur around them. It may seem that the vehicle of life and politics has gone off-track

but the site of the accident turns out to have been the intended destination. And in his inimitable humour laced style the author makes a few revealing character studies. Gandhi ji believed in the power of truth-his truth, for he assumed his truth was the universal truth. Nehru allowed himself, perhaps not entirely unwillingly to be pulled into the petty struggle for power and dominance. Indira Gandhi made the grievous mistake of believing she was indispensable and she alone held the key to Indian problems.

The Mahabharata also proved that even Yudhishtir, the paragon of virtue, the embodiment of Dharma resorted to a lie to achieve his end and proved that he was not infallible. Mohandas K Gandhi who stood up for his ideals and for his country was elevated to the status of a Mahatma. However, we gloss over the fact that he had his failings like his inability to prevent the partition of India despite his promise never to let that happen. He was only an ordinary man albeit one with extraordinary vision. Tharoor concludes his brilliant book with his version of Yudhishtir's conversation with Yama, the Lord of Death. He ruminates on what might have been and exhorts all to remember that there is no one Dharma, no one truth. Dharma is constantly evolving. Our standards and our code of conduct must come not from our past but from our present. 'That is sacrilege' his preceptor breathed. If there is one great Indian principle that has been handed down through the ages. It is that of the paramount importance of practicing Dharma at any price. Life itself is worthless without Dharma. Only Dharma is eternal :

> 'India is eternal' Yudhishtir said 'But Dharma appropriate for it at different stages of its evolution has varied. I am sorry, if there is one thing that is true today, it is that there are no classical verities valid for all time. I believed differently, and have paid the price of being defeated, humiliated and reduced to irrelevance. It is too late for me to do anything about it: I have had my turn. But for too many generations

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now we have allowed ourselves to believe India had all the answers, if only it applied them correctly. Now I realized that we do not know all the questions' (pp. 417-18).

The divisions [that matter] are less between Indian and Indian whether Hindu-Muslim, Brahmin-untouchable, landlord-peasant or bureaucrat-revolutionary–than between Indian and India. And what is far more fearsome than economic stagnation or political apathy is that atrophy of the line of association that binds the one's fortunes indissolubly to the others. For otherwise we have the strange spectacle of a nation without nationals, of Indians who are not involved in India. Today the issues that confront India are, in a strikingly different way. There is no immediate threat of a suspension of our basic freedoms, as there was then. But in this book, he argues that India is, in a phrase first used by the British historian E.P. Thompson, "the most important country for the future of the world."[1] For Indians stand at the intersection of four of the most important debates facing the world at the end of the twentieth century: The bread-versus freedom debate- can democracy "deliver the goods" to alleviate desperate poverty, or do its inbuilt inefficiencies only to impede rapid growth? Is the instability of political contention (and of makeshift coalitions) a luxury that a developing country cannot afford? As today's young concentrate on making their bread, should they consider political freedom a dispensable distraction? The centralization-versus-federalism debate- Does tomorrow's India need to be run by a strong central government able to transcend the fissiparous tendencies of language, caste, and region, or is that government best which centralizes least?

The pluralism-versus-fundamentalism debate—Is the secularism established in India's Constitution, and now increasingly attacked as a westernized affectation, essential in a pluralist society, or should India, like many other Third World countries, find refuge in the assertion of its own

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religious identity? The "Coca-colonization" debate, or globalization versus self-reliance should India, where economic self-sufficiency has been a mantra for more than four decades, open itself further to the world economy, or does the entry of Western consumer goods bring in alien influences that threaten to disrupt Indian society in ways too vital to be allowed? Should we raise the barriers to shield our youth from the pernicious seductions of MTV and McDonald's?

These are not merely academic debates; they are now being enacted on the national and world stage, and the choices we make will determine the kind of India our children will inherit in the twenty-first century. And since the century will begin with Indians accounting for a sixth of the world's population, their choices will resonate throughout the globe. This book is not a survey of modern Indian history, though it touches upon many of the principal events of the last five decades. There are those who wish it to become a Hindu Rashtra, a land of and for the Hindu majority; those who wish to raise higher the protectionist barriers against foreign investment that are slowly beginning to come down; those who believe that a firm hand at the national helm would be preferable to the failures of democracy India had political assemblies with elaborate parliamentary rules of procedure at a time when most of the rest of the world suffered under despotism or anarchy. An India that denies itself to some Indians could end up being denied to all Indians. In asserting this, a few words of explanation are in order. This book is a paean to India, yet it emanates from the pen of a United Nations official who has lived outside India for most of his adult life. The Indian adventure is that of human beings of different ethnicities and religions, customs and costumes, cuisines and colors, languages and accents, working together under the same roof and sharing the same dreams. That is also what the United Nations, at its best, seeks to achieve.

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It is arguably easier for Indians than for most others to work with people who are unlike them. In his magisterial essay on life and thought in Mexico, The Labyrinth of Solitude, Octavio Paz observed that his thoughts were not concerned with the entire Mexican population, but rather with those among them who are conscious of themselves, for one reason or another, as Mexicans. The same applies, for comparable reasons, to this book, which speaks of an India that exists in the imagination of most, but not all, of my countrymen and countrywomen. Paz went on to serve as Mexico's ambassador to India in the 1960s, and he saw that, as in the Mexico he was writing about in 1950, several historical epochs and states of development that coexist simultaneously in India. This is still the case, and it would be foolish as well as presumptuous to seek to speak for them all in a general notion of Indianness. In the last fifty years not all Indians have learned to think of themselves as Indians, and to speak of an Indian identity is really to subsume a number of identities that vary depending upon class, caste, region, and language. The singular thing about India is that you can only speak of it in the plural. India is fundamentally a pluralist state; its pluralism emerges from its geography, is reflected in its history, and is confirmed by its ethnography. It is this that I hark to in my writing, which - when it succumbs to generalization - will generalize for the many rather than for the mass.

It is interesting that the same period that has witnessed the phenomenon of the Hindu epic as a popular Indian TV series, has also seen a variety of other re workings and revaluations of these texts, the Mahabharata in particular, in various media both in India and the West. Two recent examples of this are of particular interest. One renders the epic as a lighthearted contemporary historical novel and a modem political roman-a-clef while the other makes it a rather brooding and almost Gothic universalism "epic of all manhood."[2] The former is Shashi Tharoor's entertaining *The Great Indian Novel* and the latter, Peter Brook and Jean-Claude Carriere's ponderous and gloomy ten-hour drama

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that became three-hour film. Tharoor's four hundred pages novel is constructed as an epic dictated by an aged politician and poet, Ved Vyas, to a scribe, Ganapathi, in which every significant individual in the Indian freedom struggle and post-Independence political arena from Gandhi and Jinnah to Lord Mountbatten, Indira Gandhi, and Morarji Desai is cleverly represented by a more or less appropriate character from the ancient epic while their historic actions and interactions are made to conform to the poem's well-known episodes.

> At the same time, Tharoor manages to send up practically every modem writer of India from Kipling and Forster to Paul Scott, Salman. Rushdie, and even M.M. Kaye with chapter titles such as "The Duel With the Crown"(p.33), "Midnight's Parents"(p.149), "The Far Power-Villain"(p.169), "Passages Through India"(p.263), and "The Bungle Book" (p.337), giving free rein to a cheerful irreverence that does not spare even the sacred texts of the Indian tradition as chapters like "The Rigged Veda"(p.279) and indeed the theme of the whole work made clear. Thus we spot our five in a village tom by the conflict between two landlords, Pinaka and Saranga. Pinka, wealthy and powerful, always seen with an eagle on his shoulder, has immense holding, farmed by battalions of tenets who are paid well for his services but have no title of land (p. 294)

In many cases the characterizations are wickedly amusing. Thus the central figure Gangaji, the ascetic patriarch of the Nationalist movement is a telling parody of Gandhi as Bhishma, a shrewd political operator obsessed with his own enemas as with his country's freedom while Tharoor's Dhritarashtra, a snobbish, aloof Anglophile, blind to the realities around him, makes an unfairly caustic caricature of Nehru. Some of Tharoor's portraits cum character assassinations seem excessive. An example is his rendering of Subhash

Chandra Bose as a Pandu who persuades his wife Kunti to engage in a series of amatory adventures to ensure his heirs and who goes down in flames in a Japanese plane after a fatal heart attack brought on by his sexual exertions with the unwilling Madri. But he is perhaps most savage in his portrayal of Indira Gandhi as the heartless and scheming Priya Duryodhini who embodies malicious personality the evil of all the hundred sons of the epic Dhritarashtra. Although in this case he carries the bitter joke so far that his wit is dulled by animus, his caricatures of most figures, notably Kama (Jinnah) whose foppish and aristocratic airs conceal his lowly origins and of the unbearably self-righteous urine-quaffing Yudhistir (Morarji Desai) as well as his renditions of many historical events such as Gangaji's epic Mango March make an entertaining reading. At the same time, Tharoor occasionally abandons his caustic parody to write movingly about the triumphs and tragedies of the freedom movement as in his finely sketched and uncharacteristically reverential account of Gandhi's successful satyagraha on behalf of the riots of Champaran rendered as the plantation laborers of Motihar, and his rendering of Dyer's infamous Jallianwalla Bagh massacre as an Indian Guemica perpetuated by one Col. Rudyard in the Bibigarh Gardens. Towards the end of the book, Tharoor permits his indignation at Mrs. Gandhi's suspension of India's democracy during the Emergency and his bitter animosity toward her to distract him from his generally witty style while he preaches about the problems of contemporary India.

Indeed in the closing chapters of the novel, after a roguish account of the birth of India's Draupadi Mokrasi as the child of the illicit union of Dhritarashtra and the wife of the Viceroy, his fight for skillful parody seems to fail him and he lapses into a hurried series of characterizations and vignettes involving the Pandavas and the poorly realized character of Krishna (Krishna Menon) that generally lack the deftness of the earlier portions of the work. After a certain point one feels that the joke—and the novel—have gone too far.

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The Great Indian Novel is an entertaining and occasionally touching one that will certainly repay the time of anyone who interested in it and moderately knowledgeable about two somewhat disparaging subjects, the Mahabharata and the history of modem India which are so cleverly intertwined in this remarkable book. Politics and history becomes the part and parcel of *The Great Indian Novel.* There is not even a single line in the novel that is untouched by the sensibility of politics and history.

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