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**SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL* AS A POLITICAL
SATIRE**

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ABSTRACT

Shashi Tharoor's novel *The Great Indian Novel* is a political satire that evaluates the situations of 1989. It is a fictional work that takes the story of the Mahabharata, the Indian epic, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Indian Independence movement and the first three decades post-Independence. Figures from Indian history are transformed into characters from mythology, and the mythical story of India is retold as a history of Indian Independence and subsequent political conventions up through the 1970s. The Mahabharata is an epic tale describing the historical dynasty's political struggle over the throne of the Kingdom of Hastinapur between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, two branches of the heirs of King Shantanu. In his novel, Tharoor recasts the story of nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related by their personal and political histories. Tharoor's narration takes an irreverent tone toward figures such as Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, who are ordinarily treated with reverence by Indians. *The Great Indian Novel* is a political allusion to the long-standing ideas of the author Shashi Tharoor. He is a member of the Indian Parliament from the Thiruvananthapuram constituency in Kerala. He previously served as the United Nations Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and as the Indian Minister of State for External Affairs. In *The Great Indian Novel*, the People's Front defeats the Kaurava Party in the elections. Even though Priya Duryodhani is no longer Prime Minister, she is gathering political strength again and gains power after another election following the fall of the government. *The Great Indian Novel* is the Shashi Tharoor's debut work of fiction, is essentially a retelling of the Indian epic Mahabharata, but it falls within the realm of political satire by drawing parallels with major events in India's political history during the freedom movement as well as in the post-Independence era.

KEYWORDS : Political satire, Independence movement, political allusion, post Independence era.

INTRODUCTION

The Great Indian Novel is a novel by Shashi Tharoor that uniquely blends political satire with the rich tapestry of Indian mythology, specifically the Mahabharata. Through a creative reimagining of this ancient epic, Tharoor draws parallels between the epic's power struggles and the tumultuous political landscape of India during and after the independence movement. Set against the backdrop of significant events from the late 20th century, the narrative explores the complexities of Indian democracy, the interplay of personal and political ambitions, and the evolution of a nation grappling with its identity.

At its core, the novel centers around the electoral battle between the People's Front and the Kaurava Party, mirroring the rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas of the Mahabharata. In a bold and irreverent tone, Tharoor challenges the traditional reverence for prominent figures in Indian history, such as Mohandas Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, presenting them as flawed individuals shaped by their ambitions and decisions. Through its vibrant characters and sharp wit, "The Great Indian Novel" serves as both a critique of contemporary politics and a reflection on the enduring legacy of historical narratives in shaping modern India. By weaving together myth and history, Tharoor invites readers to reconsider the stories of their past while providing a lens through which to view the increasingly complex political landscape of today. is a novel by Shashi Tharoor that uniquely blends political satire with the rich tapestry of Indian mythology, specifically the Mahabharata. Through a creative reimagining of this ancient epic, Tharoor draws parallels between the epic's power struggles and the tumultuous political landscape of India during and after the independence movement. Set against the backdrop of significant events from the late 20th century, the narrative explores the complexities of Indian democracy, the interplay of personal and political ambitions, and the evolution of a nation grappling with its identity.

POLITICAL SATIRE

The Indian Freedom Struggle is a significant chapter in India's history, immortalized in the literature of various Indian languages, including Hindi, Marathi, Telugu, and Tamil. Notable poets and writers like Makhanlal Chaturvedi, Subhadra Kumari Chauhan, Veer Savarkar, Sane Guruji, and Subramany Bharati have enshrined the freedom struggle in their works. Similarly, Indian authors writing in English, such as Mulk Raj Anand, R.K. Narayan, and Raja Rao, reverently depicted the freedom movement and its iconic leader, Mahatma Gandhi. As time progressed and the Nehruvian Era transitioned into history, the initial exuberance of independence began to wane. The harsh realities of life and the costs paid for freedom came to light, prompting a more critical examination of the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru. Writers such as Mukul Keshavan, Amitav Ghosh, and Shashi Tharoor began to explore the complexities of the freedom struggle from multiple perspectives.

In "The Great Indian Novel," Shashi Tharoor offers a provocative and satirical critique of the Gandhian freedom movement by reinterpreting the epic Mahabharata. Written in 1989, over fifty years after Raja Rao's "Kanthapura" (1938), Tharoor's work questions the effectiveness and relevance of Gandhian ideals. While Raja Rao embraced Gandhi's philosophy of Satyagraha and portrayed it as instrumental in India's independence, Tharoor presents a contrasting viewpoint,

depicting the Gandhian movement as fundamentally flawed. Tharoor employs magical realism and ornamental prose in "The Great Indian Novel," transforming characters from Mahabharata into caricatures that critique the figures of the freedom struggle. The novel's structure mirrors the world's longest epic, yet Tharoor subverts its mythic grandeur. The renowned heroes of the Mahabharata appear as non-heroes in Tharoor's retelling; the Pandavas—Yudhishtira, Bhima, Arjuna, Nakula, and Sahadeva—lack any heroic qualities, and Krishna, the epic's guiding force, is reduced to a mere MLA in a South Indian district.

The character of Priya Duryodhani offers another layer of satire, as she embodies the archetypal villain from the Mahabharata, yet her identity is altered to reflect a post-colonial context, in line with Indira Gandhi's controversial political legacy. Dritarastra and Pandu maintain their original flaws—blindness and paleness—while Gandhari is depicted as a grim, blind-folded figure, subverting traditional representations of women in the epic. Mahatma Gandhi himself is caricatured in Tharoor's portrayal of Ganga Dutta, a 'Mahaguru' whose leadership is both dignified and absurd. This portrayal critiques Gandhi's perceived shortcomings and the manipulation of his principles within the political landscape of free India. Further, the character of Jawaharlal Nehru is represented through the figure of Dhritarastra, whose blind adherence to trust—specifically regarding Chinese relations—juxtaposes the historical failures of India's foreign policy with the narrative of the Mahabharata.

By establishing Ganga Dutta as a character who, while embodying Gandhi's ideals, ultimately subverts them, Tharoor underscores the contention that the Gandhian strategy was not as unassailable as it was depicted in earlier nationalist literature. Drona, representing Jayaprakash Narayan, and his disciple Yudhishtira, who is likened to Morarji Desai, further situate Tharoor's critique within the political developments that followed Independence. Moreover, Tharoor employs significant historical moments—such as the Champaran Satyagraha and the Dandi March—transforming these events into comical episodes that critique the romanticized narrative surrounding Gandhi and his tactics. In turning the Champaran Satyagraha into the "Motihari Satyagraha," Tharoor reframes Gandhi's engagement with British authorities by showing that his successes were often contingent on cooperation rather than unwavering resistance. The Dandi March, famously revered for its symbolism, becomes the "Great Mango March," where Gandhi's choice to pluck a mango from a Kaurava party sympathizer serves to question the authenticity and heroism of his actions.

Through these reimagined incidents, Tharoor not only reflects on the disillusionment following independence but also critiques the limitations of non-violent resistance in the face of complex political realities. His satirical approach serves as a commentary on the state of contemporary India, suggesting that the romantic narratives surrounding the freedom struggle do

not adequately capture the multifaceted nature of India's political landscape post-independence. In conclusion, Shashi Tharoor's "The Great Indian Novel" stands as a pioneering work that critiques the established narratives associated with the Indian freedom struggle. By parodying iconic figures and events, Tharoor prompts readers to reconsider the complexities and contradictions inherent in the Gandhian movement and the broader quest for independence. This critical satire invites further discourse on the legacies of nationalism in India, challenging the foundational stories that have informed the nation's identity. Tharoor's ornamental style and innovative structuring serve to enhance his interrogation of historical myth, merging literary prowess with a nuanced exploration of post-colonial realities.

CONCLUSION

Thus Tharoor satirizes the famous Dandi March, which in fact changed the course of the freedom struggle in India. Mahatma Gandhi became a hero of the masses but in Tharoor's novel he is reduced to a comical figure. Thus the entire freedom movement and Gandhiji's attitude towards Satyagraha, his views on truth and non-violence, his views on khadi and the weaving of the Charkas are dealt with ironically by Tharoor and he seems to suggest that the milestones like the Chauri Chaura incident, the Jallianwala Bagh Massacre, the Dandi March which finally led to the freedom of India were all failures and finally the attainment of freedom itself was a failure as the events that took place after the freedom—the war with Pakistan and the partition of the country itself showed. This is the third millennium perspective that Tharoor seems to project in the novel. The kind of relationship that India shares with her neighbors, antagonistic with one and uneasy with another puts the entire foreign policy into question. The successors of Gandhi and his legacy did not seem to live up to the expectations of the people of India and it is with this aspect in view that Tharoor has written this novel, and further when the youth of India seem to relish a shorter path to the solution of any problem the path adopted by Gandhiji—his fasts, his atonements, his non-cooperation—seems to be quite outdated. But the fact remains that the values of truth, nonviolence, purity of thought and action taught by Gandhiji are universal though for a while it may seem that they are outdated. This is perhaps the message that Raja Rao wants to convey in his *Kanthapura*. However, Shashi Tharoor presents a post-modernist and a post-colonial view of the freedom struggle and therefore his perspective while looking at the event changes. The values that were dear to Gandhi do not seem to impress him. Therefore, he has ironically presented the values propagated by Gandhiji and has ended up parodying the entire freedom struggle.

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