

**CHAPTER FOUR**

**THE PORTRAYAL OF EMERGENCY**

**IN SHASHI THAROOR'S**

***THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL***



*“Derive your standards from the world  
around you and not from a heritage  
whose relevance must be constantly tested.”*

*- Shashi Tharoor*

## **4.1 Introduction:**

In Vanashree Tripati's view the recasting of the Myth to explicate the political realities of modern India raises high expectations. Myth, according to her, serves as a mediator between known and unknown dogmatic vision ever open to individual perceptions. And one of the fascinating aspects of the birth and development of the novel as an art-form has been its changing connection with history.

The Third World Writers have obtained an increasing interest in thematizing Indian cultural history in recent years. Their efforts are not merely to fictionalize history to its authenticity but to investigate the ontological issue of fact and fiction and the relation between fact of history and the act of recording in inherited historiography. Their attempt is to re-write history rather than documenting it as it is.

### **4.1.1 Tharoor and His Novels :**

Tharoor was born in London, grown up in Bombay and Calcutta, took a doctorate from Tufts University, USA, worked for the

UNO and walk as a freelance journalist and writer. His novels highlight the importance of myth as inspiration and theme for creative writing even at the end of the twentieth century. Till the date, he has published three novels, The common Wealth Prize Winner *The great Indian Novel* (1989), a political satire based on the great Indian epic *Mahabharata*, the Hollywood novel set in Bombay film industry *Show Business* (1992) and *Riot : A Novel* (2001), based on Ramjanam Bhumi and Babri Masjid issue. A collection of short stories *A Five Dollar Smile* (1991), a Non-fiction, *India : From Midnight to the Millennium* (1997) and has recently published *Nehru : The Invention of India* (2003) as a part of penguin lives series.

#### 4.1.2 The Great Indian Novel :

As once Gunter Grass said,

“Some stories should be kept alive

by Literature ... Literature must refresh memory”.

(Tharoor : 1991;30)

Shashi Tharoor too, in his *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) uses the mythical setting of the ancient epic to represent India's march from the remote past to the present. He aims at bringing about a lively

and vigorous correspondence between myth and reality and successfully combines history, myth, autobiography, fiction, non-fiction, fantasy, song/verse to achieve it. *The Great Indian Novel* is a work of high order, genuinely imbued with post-modernist sensibility, as point out by Tripathi. (1994).

With the narrator ved vyas and script writer Ganapati, Tharoor narrates the Soga of modern India. He not only transforms the ancient myth into pre and post independence politics, but also transforms the contemporary political history into a myth or a metaphor which contains an overwhelming awareness of Gandhi, Nehru, Mrs. Gandhi as a prominent figures in history.

Like *Mahabharata*, the novel too is divided into 18 books with cryptic title. Through each chapter, Tharoor presents the true shades of Indian history with its perverse manner. The political history of modern India resembles closely with the events and the characters of the three thousand years ancient epic of India, *Mahabharata*.

The national history is presented from the rise of the nationalist

movement of Maharma Gandhi (Gangaji-Bhism) to the post Emergency period extended till Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in 1984. Some of the important events like Jalian wallah Bagh Massacre, the salt Satyagraha (Mango-Satyagraha) the accession of Kashmir, the partition of India (Karnistan), War with China and Pakistan (Chakar and Karnistan), the abolition of privy purses and the nationalisation of Banks, the dark period of Emergency (internal siege), the formation of Bangladesh (Glebian Desh), formation and fall of Janata Party and re-election and assassination of Mrs. Gandhi have been highlighted in the novel.

## **4.2 Portrayal of Emergency :**

Many of the political leaders and writers consider the self-proclaimed Emergency of 1975 as the darkest holocaust from which India is yet unable to overcome. After Allahabad High Court's verdict on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1975, Opposition and few of the leaders within the congress party insisted on Mrs. Gandhi's resignation. Mrs. Gandhi was found guilty of corrupt practices in 1971 elections on the petition filed by Raj Narian JP's agitation and Satyagraha filled the

political atmosphere with bitterness and impatience. Her decision to hold the office till her appeal was heard and judgement given by the Supreme Court was taken as a threat to the existence of democracy and of a challenge to the constitution of the country.

#### **4.2.1 JP'S Movement :**

JP's movement brought an awareness about their rights among the people and also unrest. JP's Satyagraha demanded resignation on the moral and ethical basis from Mrs. Gandhi in honour of democracy. It went to an extent by asking legislative members to resign, urging students to boycott classes and police to disobey the orders given by the government. The opposition members saw a chink in the congress party and seized the opportunity to dethrone Mrs. Gandhi on Moral ground.

Tharoor, with the caricatures of JP as Drona and Mrs. Gandhi as Priya Duryadhani has animated the whole situation,

“The conviction- which deprived her of her parliamentary privileges pending appeal-gave

the popular uprising just the spark it needed. They turned their movement into a massive orchestrated cry for her resignation, threatening to court arrest outside her home every day until she quit. More ominously for her, Drana began to talk to a faction with in her own party led conspicuously by her son Ashwathaman, which was calling for her step down 'temporarily' in order to quieten the opposition demands and give the judicial process time to work."

(365)

#### **4.2.2 Proclamation of Internal Emergency**

**(/'Siege') :**

Tharoor has boldly and creatively used the mythical setting of *Mahabharata* of the hisorical process of India. The events and characters of the grand epic closely resemble to the political episodes and politicians of pre-and post-independence India.



Priya Duryodhani was under immense pressure of Drona's popular uprising which demanded her resignation as the,

“ ... Legalistic provincial court found the Prime Minister guilty of a 'corrupt electoral Practice' for making a campaign speech for her Parliamentary set during the last elections from A platform shared with president Ekalavya”.

(365)

The conviction had divested her from parliamentary privileges. The verdict favoured the wind for the sparks hidden deep in the hearts of the agitators and the agitators threaten her with their court arrest. But she had decided not to descend and it was confirmed by her close advisor the Bengali lawyer Shakuni Shankar Dey.

He convinced her,

“Don't resign, even for appearance sake”.

(365)

Many opportunistic leaders within and outside the party were awaiting to take control over her. He taught her the lesson of 'Hit

back' (365), while taking whole of the power in one hand, he taught her the rules of authoritarian game. He planted the idea of internal siege in her mind, the declaration of siege (Emergency) can enable her to suppress the glaring sparks of agitation against her. It would also permit her to rule out her own rules of the game. He asked her to declare internal siege and not to mention press censorship, as there was a grave threat to the stability and security of the nation from internal disruption. He added,

“ No one has ever defined the permissible procedure under an internal siege, which leaves it more or less up to us to define them’ Shakuni added, ‘I think they could very safely include the preventive detention of some of our more obstreperous politicians... ”

(366)

While explaining the advantages of siege for her, he also points the co-operation of one single signature from the president and she with her determined look, says,

•  
“ It is time, that Ekalavya earned  
his keeping”

(366)

Tharoor, with the help of mythological characters such as priya Duryodhani which shows an exact resemblance with Mrs. Gandhi, Eklavya with F.A. Ahmed and Shakuni who is a composite picture of Sanjay Gandhi and Sidharatha Shankar Rey tries to animate and meditate the contemporary political scenario and the mental make-up of the leaders during the period.

### **4.3 Political Arrests and Censorship :**

Tharoor has freely used the allegorical narrative mode with *Mahabharata* as its base. His post modernist style has allowed him the free variations with the epic characters to modalise it so as to befit it with today's political leaders and situation.

Ved-Vyasa narrates how the nights were filled with the threat of knocks of detention he narrates,

“Shakuni’s plans were put smoothly into motion and teams of red-eyed policemen knocked before dawn at the doors of the uprising’s leaders to take them away to the prison and the ‘rest houses’ that would be their homes for months to come”.

(368)

The arrest of Drona at mid-night resembles with the arrest of Jayprakash Narayan and the utterance,

‘Avinash Kale, Viparita budhi !’ confirms the identification.

Tharoor, as Ved Vyasa also collects the reaction of the Indian people towards the Emergency and detention of the agitators. He says,

“The declaration of the siege, the arrest of the agitators the silence in the streets, had been accepted by non-political India without a murmur. The only sound that replaced

the months of clamour appeared to be  
the deflating hiss of a long public sign  
of relief”.

(370)

While jolting the reactions of nation and noting the events during the Emergency of 1975, Tharoor has truly inspected the Indian mind and its instincts.

Ved Vyasa’s only comment on the censorship of press imposed by Mrs. Gandhi is,

‘ ... She could have let the newspapers write what they wanted, and it would have changed nothing. Instead, the very fact that they could no longer write what they wanted became a burning issue to those for whom conversation was now the only outlet ’.

(373)

In his view, Mrs. Gandhi hurried unmindfully for the

censorship, because the expression of private opinions was not the proof of the existence of a viable and demanding public opinion.

#### **4.4 Dream Fantasy :**

Tharoor speaking through Ved Vyasa, has skillfully explored the theme of disrobing Draupadi as an Emergency. In his dream, Ved Vyasa sees Shakuni and Priya Duryodhani sketching a plan to defeat Pandavas.

In his dream, Ved Vyasa sees Shakuni poisoning Priya Duryodhani's mind by asking her to call Yudhistir to play dice with Shakuni, Shakuni is unbeatable in the dice. He asks her to take Dhritarashtra's concern for the dice and warns her against Vidur who always seems to favour Pandavas. Pandavas accept the challenge and reach Hastinapur with Draupadi. In the game Yudhistir loses everything, he even loses his brothers. Due to temptation of getting everything back again he wagers-

“Draupadi, most desirable of all  
women, in the full flower of her youth,

pride of our nation and mother of  
our fondest hopes- I stake her”.

(379)

Dice flew from Shakuni’s wrist and fortune cries over  
Yudhistir.

Duryodhani summons all the Pandavas and Draupadi Mokradi  
as her slaves. Draupadi refuses to come and Duhshasan was ordered to  
bring her. Duhshasan drags D. Mokradi to the centre. Humiliated  
figures of Draupadi and her husbands were asked to drop their  
princely attire. To avoid further humiliation, Pandavas remove their  
upper garments, while Draupadi stands still in dismay. With Karna’s  
provocation Duhshasan moves forward to strip Draupadi Mokradi.  
When all her pleading fails and senses turn barren, D. Mokradi cries  
for Krishna, to help her. Krishna comes to her help in a magical way  
and her saree turns into several yards longer than regular six.  
Duhshasan turns into distress, yet keeps on stripping. Ved Vyasa  
imagines,

“In my dream her cry was no longer  
for Krishna, but for me ...”

(382)

Duhshasan stops exhausted and sees that yet Draupai’s honour,  
her womanhood was still covered and,

‘ ... Surrounded by enough resplendent  
material to clothe her for years.”

(382)

Bhim takes his terrible oath and Krishna appears on the ceiling  
to prophesies ,

‘However hard you try, Priya Duryodhani,  
you and your men will never succeed in stripping  
Draupadi Mokrasi completely. In our country,  
She will always have enough to maintain  
her self-respect. But what about you?”

(382)

Ved Vyasa finds himself very surprised in his dream when his  
Arjun, unlike mythological Arjun, invites Priya Duryodhani for



game of dice. And Duryodhani just to restore her credibility could not refuse. This time even the dice were changed; the dice looked as if they were made up of paper, the material of ballot. Duryodhani picked the dice and prepared to throw she knew she was going to lose.

Shashi Tharoor has linked the two important events of *Mahabharata* i.e. 1) The game of dice and

2) The battle of Kurukshetra,

with Emergency and the election of 1977. He has most effectively used the mythical setting of the episode of the disrobing of Draupadi by correlating it with Mrs. Gandhi's misrule (Dushasan) of the country, her overthrowing of democracy and abolition of constitutional rights during Emergency. Stripping of Drapadi symbolises denouncing of Indian dignity and freedom by Mrs.Gandhi.

D. Mokrasi's marriage with Arjuna represents the union of democracy with people through press media. Modern Arjun as a journalist, represents the power and weakness of the Indian press. In Ved Vyasa's opinion. Arjun has an absured mixture of attributes and

can truly give voice to the Indian spirit. He has to play the role of saviour and rescue the nation from political tyranny and oppression.

#### **4.5 Excesses of Emergency :**

Tharoor, through the episode of disrobing of Draupadi has metaphorically sketched the excess of Emergency. He portrays the stripping of Draupadi as Duryodhani stripping the nation of values and institutions. He sees the proclamation of internal emergency as,

“ ... a license for the police to do  
much as they pleaded, setting scores,  
looking up suspects, enemies and  
sometimes creditors without due process  
on above all, picking up young men  
at the village tea-shops to have their  
Vasa cutoff in fulfilment of the  
arbitrary sterilisation quotas that  
Shakuni had persuaded the  
Prime-Minister to decree”.

(384)

He presents the stripping of Draupadi as the nullification of constitutional rights, the enforced sterilisation and the terror it has created among the victims and the government employees, he further narrates,

“ The poors were now the subject  
to random police harrassment, to  
force displacement from their homes  
in the interests of slum-clearance  
and urban renewal, to compulsory  
vasectomies in pursuance and  
population-control campaigns  
on which they had never voted”.

(384)

His commentary on beautification/ slum-clearance programme that meant the bulldozing of houses, sterilisation campaign, abolition of bonded labours, shows that these events have added more griminess and denseness of the torture and dissatisfaction among Indians during the authoritarian rule of Mrs. Gandhi.

## 4.6 V.Vji's Views on Emergency :

*Mahabharata* was narrated by Ved Vyasa, the epic poet, likewise, Tharor's *The Great Indian Novel* is narrated by the poet's namesake Ved-Vyasa who is modernised in his name as, ' V.Vji'. He also has ironically ambivalent and varied strategies of narration. Through his narration, he sews and unsews the political history of India from the beginning of twentieth century to the assassination of Indira Gandhi. Through Ved Vyasa's views, Tharoor attempts to clarify and interpret the contemporary political scenario. While meditating on Emergency, Ved Vyasa sees that no other option was kept before Indira Gandhi in the teeth of check the mounting agitations against her. Her also sees that Drona's agitation or 'Satyagraha' is leading India nowhere but to chaos. He says,

“Duryodhani's motives in proclaiming a state of siege arresting a number of opponents and imposing censorship on the press were primarily cynical and self-serving : without these steps she would not have been able to

contain the mounting pressure on her to resign.

But 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)

The declaration of Twenty - points programme, Ved Vyasa feels, will bring tremendous progress in the country and drift India away from uncertainty. He claims that this programme has an ability to washout all the shortcomings in the way of development of our nation. While glancing at its positive perspective, he says,

' The siege was accompanied by the

declaration of twenty-point

Socio-economic programme which

the government seemed determined

to implement. With the strikes and

political demonstrations banned, there

was an new sense of purpose

where earlier there had been drift and uncertainty ... The purpose of democratic government was the greatest good of the greatest number, and I had no doubt the more Indians would benefit from the abolition of bonded labour and the implementation of land reforms than would suffer from the censorship of article, however well Arjun could write them.

(369)

## **Conclusion :**

The historical fiction is internalised self-consciously working out the ideological biases. Tharoor's novel is no exception. It seeks to recover adequate sense of pride in India's cultural history and by parallel singing of past with present, he attempts to show, in human terms, what happened to us and what we have lost. He thematizes the Indian history both the ancient and the modern and symbolises the preoccupation with re-viewing history obtaining in post-colonial

writing.

With Ved Vyasa's speaking voice, Tharoor establishes the fictionality of history with the post modernist meto fictional literary tradition. The historical account of India in *The Great Indian Novel* opens with a nationalistic movement and ends with the assassination of Mrs. Gandhi in 1984. The unleashing of the Emergency and Indira Gandhi's growing powers are dramatically articulated by Tharoor through the dream-fantasy of Draupadi's stripping, during Emergency. It produces a voyeurism. He has used a hallucination technique which gives a nightmarish vision of the violation of democracy through it.

Tharoor's novel demonstrates and resembles closely the events and the characters of the great Indian epic with its political history of modern Indian. Tharoor's modern Drona fights for sake of truth and justice, he educates the people about their rights and duties and provide moral support to the protecting pillars of Indian democracy but his complicated thinking proved his undoing.

Draupadi Mokradi symbolises Democracy and her five husbands as Morarji Desai, Press, army, beauracracy and Foreign Ministry respectively. His experimental technique with cinematic devices used to portray the picture of Emergency and dream-fantasy not only conveys the political indecisive action and reaction but also allows the reader to meditate over it, and presents both the perspectives.

Here we can truly see Shashi Tharoor as a juggler of Myth, who has given the new meaning to old myth by revitalising it. He uses *Mahabharata*, which is also his primary source of inspiration to meditate over contemporary political experiences. Hence, Tharoor has both problematised history and narrated it along with Indian tradition in culturally appropriate and subversive terms of internal affair as well as imperial history and its modern legacy.

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