

## The Parody of the Sacred: A Study of the Characters in *the Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor

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### Abstract

*This paper seeks to explore the elements of Parodia sacra present in the text The Great Indian Novel by Shashi Tharoor. Intermingled with myth, Tharoor's novel playfully stretches from the 1930s to 1980s India. From the choosing of the sacred text to exploring the characters with a new postcolonial perspective, Tharoor shows his colossal force to transform the epic The Mahabharata into parodia sacra through a contemporary fictional re-telling of same through his aforementioned novel. This paper aims at finding the parodic components and the revisionist discourse existent in the text by a meticulous study of the characters portrayed in The Great Indian Novel.*

**Key Words:** Myth, Parody, Sacred Text, Satire, Humour, Imitation, Postcolonial, Postmodern.

### Introduction

Intermingled with myth, the novel *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor (1989) goes back to the period of pre-independence era with the backdrop of Indian political movements. Acutely aware of the colonial gaze reserved for a literary production by a diasporic Asian male writer, Tharoor gives the world exactly what it seeks from him- a parodist discourse. Thus, parody provides the instrument for mocking traditions and creates a literary space where the postcolonial, postmodern author can indulge in a playful mocking of the self as well as the nation. In literary terms, parody is the satiric and ironic imitation of a literary work. M.H. Abrams (1988) recognizes the term 'parody' as similar to 'burlesque' and defines it as:

'an incongruous imitation'; that is, it imitates the manner (the form and style) or else, the subject matter of a serious literary work or a literary *genre*, in verse or in prose, but makes the imitation amusing by a ridiculous disparity between the manner and the matter (Abrams, p. 26).

This paper seeks to find out the elements of *Parodia sacra* present in the text *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor. The discussed novel draws heavily from the mythical Hindu epic *The Mahabharata*. *Parodia sacra* is the parody of a sacred text of any particular religion, thus making a re-reading of the text that has been influencing the concerned religious life, race, culture, and tradition since long. Mikhail Bakhtin and Michael Holquist (1982) explain *Parodia sacra* in their book *The dialogic imagination: four essays*, as "sacred parody- or to be more accurate, parody on sacred texts and rituals. It's roots go deep into ancient ritualistic parody, ritual degrading and the ridiculing of higher powers" (Bakhtin and Holquist, P. 71). *Parodia sacra*, as a self- reflexive postmodernist text of the literary artist, serves to satire the religious text with a touch of wit and humour.

The phrase 'sacred text' can be referred to as the "writing that is venerated for the worship of a deity" (net article, np). *The Mahabharata* has continued to affect the moral, cultural, and spiritual lives of millions of Indian for thousands of years. The epic *The Mahabharata* is divided into 18 parvas and each parva is divided into many sub-parvas. The narrative largely focuses on the Kuru dynasty of Indian Subcontinent. The grandeur of the text qualifies it to be in the category of other holy texts such as *The Bible* and the great Greek epics like *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. As one can find out in the preface to the book *Mahabharata* by William Buck (2000):

*The Mahabharata* is an Indian epic, in its original Sanskrit probably the largest ever composed ... it embodies the essence of the Indian cultural heritage.

The Mahabharata is a story of dynastic struggle, culminating in an awesome battle between two branches of a single Indian ruling family ... [It] is enhanced by peripheral stories that provide a social, moral, and cosmological background to the climactic battle (Buck, p. xiii, italics original).

*The Mahabharata*, though an epic, is considered a sacred text owing to the inclusion of the most sacred text of Hinduism, *Srimad Bhagavat Gita* within itself. *Srimad Bhagavat Gita*, which contains the philosophy of Lord Krishna, is an inevitable part of *The Mahabharata* and it has earned the place of the holy text for Hindus. The appearance of numerous Hindu Gods in the epic such as Krishna, Ganesha, Hanuman, and other numerous characters with sacred connections and associations also add to the sacredness of *The Mahabharata*. With a critical study of the text *The Great Indian Novel* by eminent novelist Shashi Tharoor, this paper aims at highlighting the elements of parody drawn from *The Mahabharata* in the text. As Parody is a satire of what is conventional, conformist, and normative, Tharoor sets forth to break conventions, norms and thus indulges in a playful retelling of the sacred text of *The Mahabharata*.

The name 'Mahabharata' can be translated into English as 'the great India'. Tharoor adopts this name for the text under discussion and names it as *The Great Indian Novel*. The author expertly blends the mythical story of *The Mahabharata* and its peripheral legends with the Indian political history up to the 1980s. By retelling the grand, complex tale of *The Mahabharata* with an amazing simplicity, Tharoor also contemporizes the sacred text. According to Hindu mythology, Maharshi Ved Vyasa was the author of the sacred text *The Mahabharata* whereas Lord Ganesha happens to be the one who writes the great epic dictated by Ved Vyasa. The structure of *The Great Indian Novel* follows the structure of the great epic. *The Mahabharata*, has been divided into 18 Parvas. Each of the parva describes a particular important event in the epic. Similarly, Tharoor divides his text into eighteen parts too and names them after an important event in the novel.

Writer C. Rajgopalchari (2005) explains in the preface of his translation of *The Mahabharata*: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the persons and incidents portrayed in the great literature of a people influence national character no less potently than the actual heroes and events enshrined in its history" (Rajgopalchari, p. 2). Tharoor tries to recreate the characters from a postmodernist understanding and perspective that arises from his own reading and interpreting of the great epic. In an interview with Rajeev Srinivasan, Tharoor speaks about his text *The Great Indian novel* says:

... what I have written is not a guidebook to India: it assumes a level of interest and engagement. Of course, so you will find some explanations that Indian readers may think unnecessary, including a glossary. But this was in the interests of having a uniform text around the world [*sic*] (Srinivasan (2010), np).

Definitely conscious of a 'world' audience that would primarily translate into a western audience, Tharoor inadvertently uses an interesting tone of mockery and mythmaking, thus satiating the audience's urge for the exotic and recreating a postmodern retelling of a mythical past of his nation. Tharoor takes the mythical characters and narrative form of the sacred text *The Mahabharata* as his satiric weapon. However, his parody in text is mild and almost humorous. Writer John Gross (2010) explains in his book *The Oxford Book of Parodies*:

Parodies come in many shapes and sizes, and many different degrees of subtlety or its reverse. There are mocking parodies and affectionate parodies, parodies which are exquisitely accurate, and parodies which are rough-edged but effective ... Parody can be the most entertaining form of criticism, and one of the most delicate (Gross, p. xi).

Tharoor, in his text *The Great Indian Novel*, takes the medium of mocking parody in order to engage the reader in a debate about "the viability of systems of representation" (Woods, 2010, p. 81) with subtlety and satires on the sacred text of *The Mahabharata*.

Ved Vyasa, the author of *The Mahabharata*, and the narrator of Tharoor's *The Great Indian novel*, is the archetypal author of a satire who, with a tongue-in-cheek manner, gives his own comments about the situations and characters of the discourse. The first section of *The Mahabharata* starts with Lord Ganesha writing the text of the epic while Vyasa dictates it to him. For *The Mahabharata*, it so happens that Ganesha agrees to write the epic under the pre-condition that sage Vyasa would never pause while dictating him the epic. Vyasa agrees to the condition with a rider that Ganesha should also take time to understand the things that have been dictated before writing it down.

As in *The Mahabharata*, in the text *The Great Indian Novel* too, Ganapathi puts his condition before Vyasa, "I shall reside with you, and as long as I'm ready, you must not pause in your dictation" (Tharoor, 1989, p. 18) and Vyasa agrees. However, Vyasa remembers his own condition: "I made my own condition; that he had to understand every word of what I said before he took it down" (Tharoor, 1989, p. 18). Thus, the retired politician V.V, in the text *The Great Indian Novel*, decides to write the story of the 'Great India,' or the story of the 'Maha Bharata.' Tharoor parodies the narrative style as well as the characterization of *The Mahabharata* in his own novel. His text is in first person narration, starting with the story of the birth and early life experiences of Ved Vyasa himself, popularly known as V.V in the text. When V.V decides to write down the state of affairs of the great land of India, he searches for a writer for himself who would write the mock-heroic text for him. Then he gets the recommendation for Ganapathi, a south Indian fellow, who would write the assignment for him. After his encounter with the witty Ganapathi, Vyasa starts the assignment of his great epic about the Indian subcontinent. The name of the text by Tharoor not only resembles the name of the sacred text of *The Mahabharata* but it also resembles the mythical characters by name and appearance. Thus Tharoor playfully describes Ganapathi as, "Name of Ganapathi, South Indian, I suppose, with a big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes" (Tharoor, 1989, p. 18). By choosing a South Indian fellow as Ganapathi, Tharoor contemporizes as well as stereotypes the held notion of South Indians being studious and intelligent. Even the "shrewd, intelligent eyes" (Tharoor, 1989, p. 18) symbolizes the keenness for particular information and minute details.

Tharoor ridicules the rituals of the Vedic culture while mocking the contemporary society. While describing about himself, Vyasa in *The Great Indian Novel* mentions that: "I was born with the century, a bastard, but a bastard in a fine tradition, the offspring of a fisherwoman seduced by a travelling sage" (Tharoor, 1989, p. 19). While narrating the story of Satyavati, the mother of sage Ved Vyasa, Tharoor describes the prevalent custom where Brahmins and sages would ask young girls to accompany them with a promise of higher learning in return. Tharoor mocks this custom by saying that such company of sages resulted in the birth of numerous illegitimate children such as Ved Vyasa, the author of *The Mahabharata* itself. According to the mythical story of *The Mahabharata*, Sage Parashar is smitten by the incredible beauty of the fisherwoman and wants her to accompany him. He requests her father to let Satyavati accompany him in the pursuit of higher knowledge. Tharoor mocks at this custom when he describes the result of the companionship of Satyavati and Sage Parashar. After Ved Vyas is born and taken away from his mother, Satyavati returns to his father's place. The unmarried women accompanying the Brahmins, thus, resulted in numerous unmarried mothers and Tharoor ridicules the custom by saying through the voice of Ved Vyasa:

My father had taught her several lessons from the ancient texts, including one or two related to the inscrutabilities of virginity. Upon her return, to quell the rumours in the village, her father had Satyavati examined by the senior midwife. Her hymen was pronounced intact ... Brahmins knew a great deal in those days (Tharoor, 1989, p. 21).

By retelling a story from the past about inbreeding between high and low cultures, Tharoor firmly establishes the presence of the postmodern in both the epic *The Mahabharata* as well as his contemporary novel. Also by focusing on a merger between people from different strata of the ancient Indian society, Tharoor conveniently pokes fun at contemporary socio-political scenario of India where caste and class still hold their ground and caste-based and class-based politics still rules the roost. The society that seems prone to adulterous norms has been the target of attack by Tharoor as he ridicules the vow of life-long celibacy of Ganga. In *The Mahabharata*, King Shantanu falls in love with Satyavati, the fisherwoman and wants to marry her. But her father is against their marriage because he is afraid of prince Ganga who might end up being the king of Hastinapur. The old fisher king challenges king Shantanu to hold down Ganga from becoming the king and wants his own future grandson crowned the king. King Shantanu, who loves Ganga immensely, does not accept this cruel condition. But Prince Ganga, who loves and respects his father immeasurably, takes the vow of celibacy. He vows never to be married or indulge in an act of lust or love with a woman and it is only for the sake of his father's joy. Thus, Tharoor uses parody as a narrative weapon that looks at the sacrifice of Ganga as a mockery of filial love and respect. He ridicules the state of affairs of the royal family by writing:

Ganga was greeted with relief and admiration by his father and king. 'That was a fine thing to do, my son,' Shantanu said, unable to conceal his pleasure. 'A far, far better thing than I could ever have done. I don't know about this celibacy stuff, but I'm sure it'll do you a lot of good in the long run. I'll tell you something my son: I've simply no doubt at all that it'll give you longevity. You will not die unless and until you really want to die' (Tharoor, 1989, p. 24).

The relationship between Shantanu and Ganga, here, is a mockery of the pure relationship between father and son. Tharoor notices that Shantanu, for his own pleasures of flesh, puts his son Ganga into the ordeal. Ganga aka Bhishma is a legendary character in *The Mahabharata*. The actual name of Ganga is Debabrata. But due to the terrible vow he has taken, he is later known as Bhishma which literally means ‘something terrible.’ Further, Ganga kidnaps the three princesses Amba, Ambika and Ambalika “of a distant princeling” (Tharoor, 1989, p. 25) for his brother Vichitravirya. On the night before Vichitravirya would marry all the three princesses, Ganga encounters princess Amba in his room; he is surprised and startled because he being a celibate, did not expect a woman in his bedroom. Tharoor, however, twists the tale as he sees Ganga’s reaction from a different perspective and considers it as the celibate prince’s lack of self-restraint. He ridicules this situation when he writes: “‘I haven’t come ... for that,’ Amba said in some confusion. (Ever since his vow Ganga had developed something of an obsession with his celibacy, even if he was *the only one who feared* it to be constantly under threat.) But about other things” (Tharoor, 1989, p. 28, italics added). This hilarious depiction of the event is a satirical parody on the vow of celibacy of Ganga, who in the text *The Great Indian Novel*, is persistently in the fear of losing his celibacy. Whenever any woman encounters him, he becomes judgmental about his own mental strength. Thus, Tharoor ridicules the vow of celibacy by Ganga while satirizing on the mythical and magical events of *The Mahabharata*.

In the ancient vedic society, Brahmins enjoyed utmost respect and they were at the top of social hierarchy. In those days, there was an old tradition of Brahmins helping the widow Kshatriya women to have children. When a Kshatriya king would suddenly die and leave an heirless kingdom behind, then the Brahmins would come to rescue of the heirless land by procreating with the widow queens and, thus, giving the kingdom an heir. Tharoor mocks this by recreating the situation of the sacred text *The Mahabharata*. The adulterous custom of the vedic age, here, has been a target of mockery by Tharoor in his text, *The Great Indian Novel*. According to the epic story, Vichitravirya, the son of king Shantanu and Satyawati, dies young leaving behind his two young wives, Ambika and Ambalika childless. After the death of Vichitravirya, his mother Satyawati tries to convince her other son Ganga to “take Ambika and Ambalika to bed” (Tharoor, 1989, p. 30) as this is also a customary norm during that period. But the prince Ganga, who is now Bhishma, is too obsessed with his vow of celibacy and politely turns down the request of his mother. Being a highly ambitious mother, Satyawati turns her gaze towards her other son whom she had given birth before marriage, Ved Vyasa. As she would tell Ganga aka Bhishma:

‘Don’t forget that we have a long tradition of Brahmins coming to the rescue of barren Kshatriya. It may have fallen somewhat into disuse in recent years, but it could be useful again today’ (Tharoor, 1989, p. 31).

Finally, she succeeds in convincing Ganga to invite Ved Vyasa to the palace of Hastinapur to give an heir to the kingdom by bedding the new widows Ambika and Ambalika. Tharoor, here, expertly takes satire as a tool to serve his point of turning the heroic epic into a mock heroic epic with a tint of wit and humour. It is also interesting that Veda Vyasa, Satyabati’s son from her pre-marital liaison with Sage Parasar, would now come to the rescue of her barren kingdom.

In *The Mahabharata*, Prince Pandu, the nephew of Ganga and son of Ambalika, is the king of Hastinapur. He is happily married to two beautiful princesses, Kunti and Madri. But unfortunately, he kills sage Kindama while mistaking him to be a deer in a jungle. The sage who was making love to his wife when being killed by king Pandu, curses the king that Pandu would die the time he would make love to a woman. Tharoor takes the mythical incident in a realistic way and humorously retells the story while recreating the myth. In the text *The Great Indian Novel*, Pandu suffers from a fatal cardiac disease. Tharoor describes the position of Pandu when he writes the event. In the text, the doctor bluntly informs king Pandu that: “Your heart is simply no longer able to withstand the strain of sexual intercourse. If you want to live, Your Highness, you must abstain from any kind of erotic activity” (Tharoor, 1989, p. 66). The association of the sage, his curse and the inviolability of the state of affairs that is depicted in *The Mahabharata* has been replaced by the realistic approach of Tharoor in his text. Tharoor is almost funny when he describes the conversation between the apathetic doctor and the sexually over active Pandu thus:

‘... and I mean completely, give up the pleasures of the flesh.’  
‘You mean I have to stop eating meat?’ Pandu asked.

The doctor sighed at the failure of his euphemism. ‘I mean you have to stop having sex,’ he translated bluntly. ‘Your heart is simply no longer able to withstand the strain of sexual intercourse (Tharoor, 1989, p. 66).

*The Mahabharata* has many archetypal characters, which Tharoor explores with a new satirical perspective. The character of Ekalavya in *The Mahabharata* is very famous for his devotion towards learning and respect for his teacher. However, Tharoor has satirized this legendary character in his text. In the original sacred text, Ekalavya learns the lessons from Guru Drona without the knowledge of the Guru. When Ekalavya excels in his field and emerges as a threat to Arjun, Drona's favourite student and a prince, Guru Drona asks for the right thumb of Ekalavya as his fee for the training of the tribal boy. The poor boy cuts his thumb and presents it to guru Drona as the fee for his lessons. Nevertheless, in Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Ekalavya, very funnily, refuses to cut his thumb and give it to his teacher. Tharoor parodies the situation in which guru Drona forces Ekalavya to cut his thumb but Ekalavya, the son of a maidservant refutes such dumb foolery. Far away from being the iconic ideal student, Ekalavya symbolizes the contemporary youth whose relationship with their teachers are more of a kind of business deal. Tharoor explores the legendary character more when he writes:

Ekalavya stands his ground, but swallows, his dark face burning darker in his dismay. 'I .. I'm sorry, sir, but I cannot destroy my life and my mother's to pay your fee,' he says faintly and firmly ... The boy steps back, looks wildly around him, and trips hastily out of the room (Tharoor, 1989, p. 199).

The archetypal figure of Ekalavya who is an icon in the epic *The Mahabharata*, is thus parodied in *The Great Indian Novel* where Tharoor recreates these characters with his expert comical touch. Shashi Tharoor, by choosing the great epic *The Mahabharata*, makes an audacious attempt to make parody of the traditional customs and traditions of ancient India. From choosing of the sacred text to exploring the characters with a new postcolonial perspective, Tharoor shows his colossal force to transform the epic into a 'Parodia sacra' through a contemporary fiction re-telling of the same. While Tharoor continues the legacy of parody by imitating great epics and sacred religious texts with a satire of the conformist, the normative, the ancient as well as contemporary society, thus, simultaneously creating a revisionist discourse that laughs at held notions, he, nevertheless, sustains his own style of innovation and individuality as he negotiates both the past and the contemporary from a postcolonial, postmodern perspective. While mocking at *The Mahabharata* in the backdrop of the contemporary Indian political scenario, Tharoor expertly blends the mythical characters from *The Mahabharata* with the new age politicians and thereby, makes the parody of the sacred text an innovative one.

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