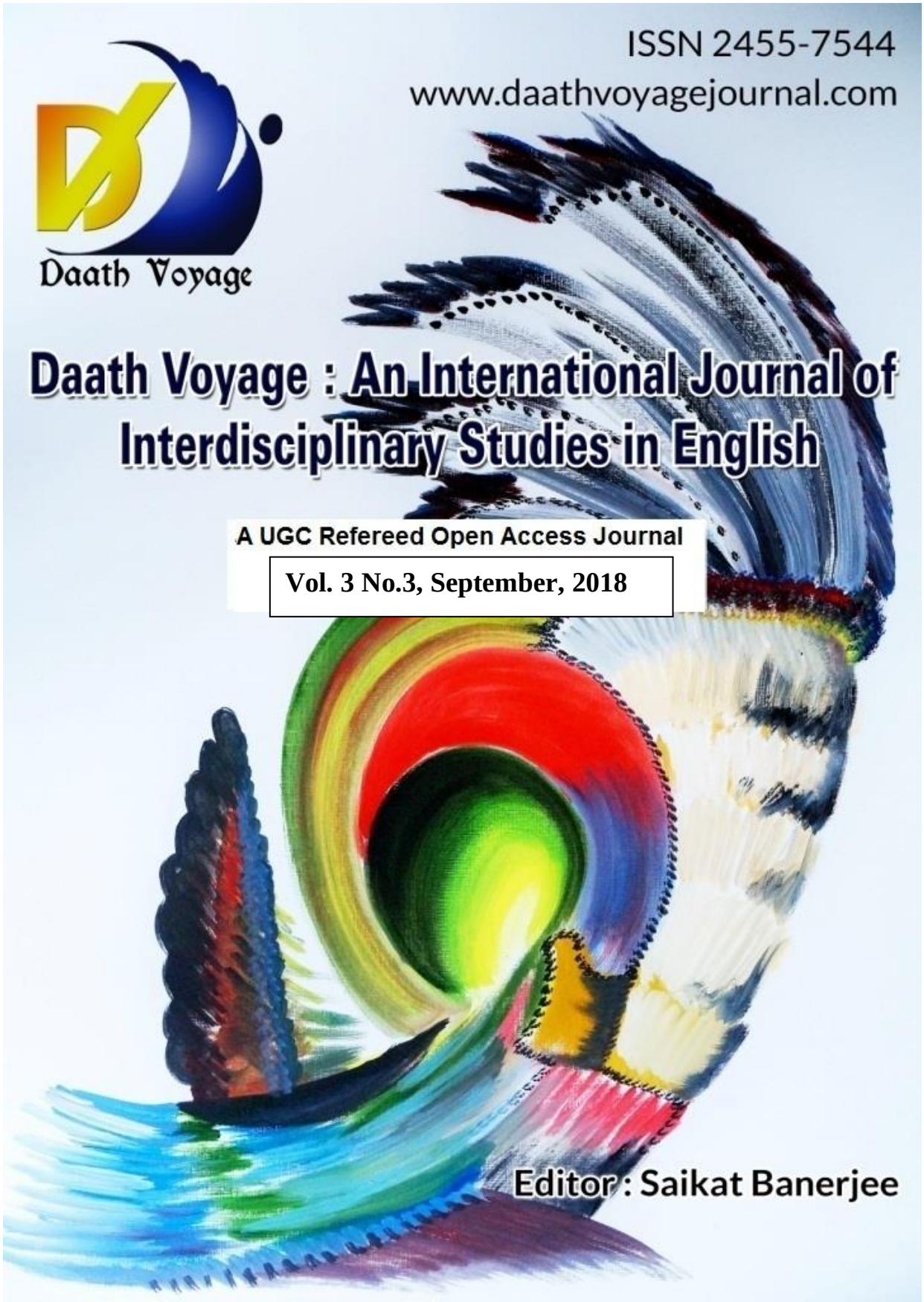

Editor: Dr. Saikat Banerjee
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences
St. Theresa International College, Thailand.

Daath Voyage
: An International Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies in English ISSN 2455-7544
A UGC Refereed e- Journal no 45349
www.daathvoyagejournal.com *Vol.3, No.3, September, 2018*

"The Twice-Born Tale": Mythology, Mock-epic and the Imagined State in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

Deeptangshu Das
Assistant Professor,
Department of English
Dibrugarh University
Assam, India

Received 23 May2018
Revised 2 August 2018
Accepted 31 August 2018

Abstract: This paper explores how Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) re-writes the mythological narrative of *The Mahabharata* while simultaneously mocking and subverting its epic conventions in order to construct a historiography of the Indian nation-state where myth and history, fact and fiction, satire and pathos, politics and spirituality come together. The novel juxtaposes the mythical time of the epic with the historical events of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the post-independence scenario. It also engages in a self-conscious and meta-textual parody of Western canonical authors such as Kipling and Forster which is hinted through the titles of the chapters. This strategy underscores Tharoor's own cosmopolitan project where he is able to reconcile various textual and cultural traditions through the polyglottic structure of his mock-epic novel. As *The Great Indian Novel* draws its inspiration from *The Mahabharata,* a classical epic that offers a vast terrain of critical thought, my focus in this paper shall remain on the way in which the literary convention of the epic enables Tharoor to offer a critique of the state apparatus. This critique becomes highly significant especially in the context of the Indian "nation-state" as it emerges after the Independence where power structures are constantly constructed and contested, used and abused.

Keywords: Epic; Mythology; Politics; Nation-state.

This paper explores how Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) re-writes the mythological narrative of *The Mahabharata* while simultaneously mocking and subverting its epic

conventions in order to construct a historiography of the Indian nation-state where myth and history, fact and fiction, satire and pathos, politics and spirituality come together. The novel juxtaposes the mythical time of the epic with the historical events of the Indian Freedom Struggle and the post-independence scenario. However, the narrative does not draw a neat and clear connection between mythological characters and the real, historical figures as Tharoor reduces them to objects of caricature. It also engages in a self-conscious and meta-textual parody of Western canonical authors such as Kipling and Forster which is hinted through the titles of the chapters. This strategy underscores Tharoor's own cosmopolitan project where he is able to reconcile various textual and cultural traditions through the polyglottic structure of his mock-epic novel. As *The Great Indian Novel* draws its inspiration from *The Mahabharata*, a classical epic that offers a vast terrain of critical thought, my focus in this paper shall remain on the way in which the literary convention of the epic enables Tharoor to offer a critique of the state apparatus. This critique becomes highly significant especially in the context of the Indian "nation-state" as it emerges after the Independence where power structures are constantly constructed and contested, used and abused.

In Tharoor's novel, it is crucial to note how mythology gets juxtaposed with the representation of sexuality and normative family as they constitute the framework within which the Indian state is represented. To elaborate this point, one has to look closely at the way in which the theme of celibacy is treated in the novel in relation to the depiction of the mythical "Great Indian Family" or the Kaurava/Pandava kingdom from *The Mahabharata* and by extension, the historical Nehru-Gandhi dynasty that became the political centre of post-Independence India. Celibacy acquires tremendous political, ideological and philosophical significance in the novel as embodied in the character of Bhisma/Ganga Datta/Gangaji/Gandhiji. Tharoor inter-connects the discourse of celibacy with the cult of the political family both within the mythical world of *The Mahabharata* and the political context of post-colonial India. Just as Ganga Datta's (Bhisma) vow of celibacy triggers the larger chain of events in the epic, similarly Gandhi's spiritual celibacy becomes a symbol of political charisma in the Indian political context. They both become charismatic figures where their practice of celibacy represents not just their rejection of normative conjugality but also

the way they keep themselves away from the positions of political power and material privilege. Even as Tharoor consciously superimposes the mythical "Gangaji" onto the historical figure of Gandhi yet he maintains a gap between Gandhi's idealism and Gangaji's fallibility.

Gangaji's celibacy becomes highly ambivalent at the same time. While he denies his own marital and sexual fulfillment yet he indirectly contributes to the continuation of the political clan. For instance, he abducts the three sisters- Amba, Ambika and Ambalika- to be married off to his half-brother Vichitavairya and whose pairings would lead to the birth of the kings Dhritarastra and Pandu. Even as Bhisma's vow of celibacy gets extolled, one can also notice the irony where he is also capable of a gendered violence as he forcibly kidnaps the three sisters to secure the kingdom for his brother. Later in the novel, Tharoor combines the mythical and historical moment of revenge where Amba/Shikhandin's killing of Bhisma is made to mirror Gandhi's assassination by Nathuram Godse.

As opposed to Gangaji's voluntary celibacy the plot also depicts the failure of an enforced celibacy as evident through Pandu's character. According to the myth, Pandu had to refrain from engaging in any act of sexual intercourse or else he would die. In the novel Tharoor draws a parallel between the mythical character of Pandu and the historical figure of Subhash Chandra Bose whose militant masculinity offers a striking contrast to his mythical counterpart. In Tharoor's novel, Pandu is killed during an air crash precisely at the moment when he consummates his marriage with Madri. This scene connects political action with sexuality where Pandu's defeat as a militant revolutionary gets intertwined with his failure to engage in a procreative, conjugal relationship. By placing Gangaji and Pandu as foils to each other and by ridiculing Pandu with a mock-heroic status, the novel seems to have endorsed the non-violent and spiritual charisma of Gandhi while it simultaneously de-glamorizes the militant charisma of Subhash Chandra Bose. This contrast can be interpreted as a tension between the different forms of charismatic authority where a certain gesture and expression of charisma is privileged against the other.

Charismatic leadership becomes one of the central themes in Tharoor's novel where charisma is invested with magical, mythical and political attributes. Reinhard Bendix in his critical assessment of Max Weber's notion of charismatic authority argues how charismatic leadership is

produced by the interaction between the leader and his follower or devotee (Bendix 352). By citing the case of Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru, Bendix argues how Nehru charisma was derived from Gandhi on account of being his disciple (346). This leader/follower, teacher/disciple motif appears and re-appears in *The Great Indian Novel* as seen in the charismatic pairing of Gangaji-Dhritarastra, Krishna- Arjuna, and Yudhishtir-Dharma. They all offer different models of charismatic political leadership. Just as Gangaji combines spirituality with political activism, Krishna's character embodies both mysticism and pragmatism. However, they both fail to bring about a long term positive change in the political order. Just as the power abuse and violence in post Independent "Hastinapur"/India ironically becomes the failure of Gangaji's political project, similarly, Krishna and Arjuna's battle against Priya Duryodhani/Indira Gandhi's despotic regime eventually proves to be futile as she eventually manages to restore her political status quo.

From the concluding chapter of the novel it seems that only the mythical king Yudhishtir emerges as a redemptive figure in the age of political crisis. He is made to embody an abstract ideal of humanism as Dharma instructs him "Uphold decency, worship, humanity, affirm the basic values of our people….Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one Dharma" (Tharoor418). By investing on the concept of "dharma" Tharoor places the issue of politics within a larger philosophical and spiritual concept.

There is yet another way in which charismatic leadership is presented in the novel. While Gangaji symbolizes the charisma of the democratic leader, Priya Duryodhani represents the charisma constructed around the autocratic ruler. The narrator tells us how during the war with "Karnistan" – an allusion to the historical Indo-Pakistan War of 1971- Duryodhani acquires her cult status as "Ma Duryodhani" and "Duryodhani Amma."In other words, she is transformed into a "national Mother Goddess" (Tharoor355). This is a clear reference to the historical and political juxtaposition of Indira/India/Shakti. Such a process of deification becomes indicative of how politics in the Indian context is deeply embedded in a narrative of religion and mythology. The image of the militant Goddess as it exists in popular imagination offers the cultural discourse around which the charisma of the female politician can be constructed.

Both the characters, Priya Duryodhani and Draupadi Mokrasi, acquire political and

ideological significance in the novel. While Draupadi is made to symbolize nationhood itself, Duryodhani represents the power of the state apparatus. While Duryodhani is invested with agency, power and political choice, her step-sister Draupadi is shown as a passive object of male fantasy lacking a voice and subjectivity of her own. As the illegitimate child of Dhritarastra and Georgina Drewpad, Draupadi Mokrasi by extension is made to symbolize the inevitable hybridity of postcolonial India where the residual colonial legacy goes onto re-shape the various socio-political and cultural institutions. Draupadi's polyandrous marriage to the Pandavas becomes emblematic of the political principle of democracy itself. As Vyas himself contemplates in the narrative- "To many the pairing would mean wedding perfection to magic; it would unite democracy with the voice of the people" (Tharoor311).

In fact, the five Pandava brothers are depicted as representatives of the different structures of the state apparatus- Yudhishtir/politics, Bhim/military, Arjun/journalism, while Nakul and Sahdev control the administrative and diplomatic service (Tharoor320). The political allegory in this sense acquires a gendered subtext where the state is imagined to be a patriarchal domain where as the nation as the abstract entity is equated with the body of Draupadi. In this context, it must be noted that the figure of Draupadi in Tharoor's novel is presented as a sharp contrast to the Draupadi in *The Mahabharata*. In the epic, Draupadi is depicted as a rebellious woman who even verbally confronts the Kauravas for her dignity.

While Draupadi Mokrasi is shown as passive and victimized, Duryodhani on the other hand achieves the status of a political matriarch. It is to be noted here that Tharoor feminizes the character of Duryodhana from the classical epic re-inventing it as "Duryodhani" to be modeled on the figure of Indira Gandhi. The character of Duryodhani highlights the power of the state apparatus where democracy can turn into tyranny. Endowed with a charisma of the mythical Goddess, Duryodhani can also manipulate political structures to her own advantage. Through its allegorical mode the novel exposes and critiques the political climate during Indira Gandhi's rule especially during the 1970s when a State of Emergency was declared. And it is noteworthy as to how Tharoor locates the climax of the Kurukshetra War in the political scenario of post Independent India where the struggle for power becomes an internal affair as seen in the constant tussle between Yudhishtir

and Duryodhani.

Through Draupadi and Duryodhani we also see how the idea of politics is embedded in the cult of the "Great Indian Family." Even as the opening page of the novel contains the family tree of the Kaurava/Pandava dynasty yet the plot reveals the irony where the same family becomes a site of political conflict, danger and threat. It is also a family that challenges the boundaries between the legitimate and the illegitimate, between norm and transgression, between fidelity and betrayal. The case of Karna and "Karnistan" (Pakistan) in the novel becomes relevant in this context. Tharoor uses the myth of Karna, the illegitimate son of Kunti who eventually demands for the separate land of Karnistan. In this complex structure of allegorization the Kaurava family is made to represent the Indian nation while Karna as the illegitimate son is equated with the Islamic nation of Pakistan. Vyas also voices Karna's predicament at one point- "If a man cannot be overcome on merit, you can always expose him by uprooting his family tree. Family trees are versatile plants" (Tharoor139). While Karna's ambiguous family location disables him in the political field, Duryodhani's lineage serves as her resource. The cult of the political family/dynasty also reveals the tension between the democratic and aristocratic structures of the nation-state. Dynasty then becomes the site where political power is constantly played out. Mark Tully elaborates on the significance of dynastic democracy in contemporary India where the dynasts are able to hold parties together. In fact, the dynasty can acquire a certain charisma that enables it to "preserve democracy by providing a means of stability" (Tully 9).

In his essay "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" Fredric Jameson proposes that "all third world texts are allegorical" and they are to be read as "national allegories" (Jameson 69). Through the process of allegorization the personal gets intertwined with the political where the "story of the private individual destiny is always an allegory of the embattled situation of the public third-world culture" (Jameson 69). Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* engages in a similar process where mythical allegory maps out the political history of the nation. Mythology then becomes the site where not just the nation but also the state apparatus can be imagined and interrogated. But even as the mock-epic structure of the novel becomes politically subversive yet the allegory nevertheless operates within the framework of Hindu mythology. The

author uses *The Mahabharata* as a reference point to trace the political and literary tradition of the "Indian" nation state but this also restricts the possibility of imagining a non-Hindu tradition. In that sense phrases such as "Great Indian novel" or the "Great Indian family" can become problematic where the line of separation between 'Indian' and 'Hindu' can easily blur.

Works Cited

Bendix, Reinhard. "Reflections on Charismatic Leadership." *Asian Survey*, vol.7, no. 6, 1967, pp. 341-352. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/2642609.

Jameson, Fredric. "Third World Literature in the Age of Multinational Capitalism." *Social Text*, no. 15, 1986, pp. 65-88. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/466493.

Tharoor, Shashi. *The Great Indian Novel*. Penguin Books, 1989.

Tully, Mark. "Mark Tully on dynastic democracy and Congress Rule in India." *India Today*, 10 Aug. 2012, www.indiatoday.in/magazine/cover-story/story/20120820-political-dynasties-independence-day-special-mark-tully-congress-it-runs-in-the-family-759392-2012-08-10.