

**Raita Merivirta-Chakrabarti****Reclaiming India's History – Myth, History and Historiography in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel***

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It has been noted that “[o]ne of the most striking trends in the Indian novel in English has been its tendency to reclaim the nation’s histories.”<sup>[1]</sup> This is perhaps not too surprising if one considers that even until quite recently, till the publication and success of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* in 1981, it was the “Western” vision of (twentieth-century) India, or, at least, a vision created by Westerners, that remained dominant in the world of fiction written in English, as also in the academic arena. Western formal and theoretical constructs of historiography were hegemonic in Indian history-writing until at least the beginning of the 1980s.

While British representations of India, from Rudyard Kipling’s *Kim* to Paul Scott’s *The Jewel in the Crown*, from E. M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* to Richard Attenborough’s film *Gandhi*, were still dominant and Britain was going through a nostalgic *Raj*-revival period, as manifested in the plethora of television series and films made on the subject in the 1980s, Indian novelist Shashi Tharoor set out to present a (hi)story of India in the twentieth century from an Indian perspective to his western(ised) readership; and tapped, in the post-Rushdie visibility of the Indian English novel, into the possibility of foregrounding India in his *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). Tharoor himself has said of his writing: “my fiction seeks to reclaim my country’s heritage for itself, to tell, in an Indian voice, a story of India.”<sup>[2]</sup> The following is an attempt to examine the means by which Tharoor seeks to reclaim India’s heritage for itself; and the question is how does he bring India and its heritage to the fore? How does his (hi)story of India relate to European narrative models? What is the role of the alleged European master-narrative in *The Great Indian Novel*: is it evoked or bypassed?

**Speaking for Indian Pasts**

Perhaps surprisingly for such an ancient civilisation, history-writing – as we understand it in the contemporary Western world – does not have a centuries-long tradition in India. Nila Shah argues that there is an obvious

conceptual difference between Indian and Western notions of history. [...] Significantly, the idea of history as a linear progression of events, a master narrative with a value of unity, homogeneity, totality, closure and identity has never appealed to the Indian mind nurtured on the concept of *karma* and *dharm[a]*.<sup>[3]</sup>

In India, myths have traditionally been seen to be more important and have more explanatory power than history, something that was also part and parcel of the twentieth-century Gandhian view, which Ashis Nandy explains as follows: “because they faithfully contain history, because they are contemporary and, unlike history, are amenable to intervention, myths are the essence of a culture, history being at best superfluous and at worst misleading.”<sup>[4]</sup> Therefore Indians were traditionally preoccupied with myths, philosophy and literary and religious writing rather than history, with the result that, as T.N. Dhar points out, despite developing flourishing traditions of “several indigenous forms of art, literature, theories of aesthetics, and various complex and highly-refined philosophical systems, [India] missed out on developing a well-formulated Indian theory and practice of history.”<sup>[5]</sup> Instead of chronicles or

annals, lists of kings or tales of battle, Indian tradition favoured hymns, epigrams, court-dramas and the like.

There are some features of history-writing in the Vedic literature, and as the renowned Indian amateur historian D.D. Kosambi notes, "[t]he sources for the older period survive as *purānas* (= 'the ancient stories')," which he, however, dismisses as "religious fables and cant, with whatever historical content the works once possessed heavily encrusted by myth, diluted with semi-religious legends, effaced during successive redactions copied by innumerable, careless scribes".<sup>[6]</sup> Kalhana's *Rājataranginī* (A.D. 1149-50), a history of Kashmir, is often mentioned as the only real historical study extant from Ancient India, and Indian historian R.C. Majumdar goes as far as to state that in the beginning of the nineteenth century, Hindus "had no knowledge of their own history".<sup>[7]</sup> Histories of medieval India are somewhat better recorded by Muslim historians. These were, however, first written with a religious purpose and dealt mostly with the Muslim population, but with the coming of the Mughals, Muslim history-writing went through a broadening of its scope and became less religion-oriented.<sup>[8]</sup>

In the latter half of the eighteenth century, European scholars became interested in India and its (ancient) past and began studying and writing on Indian culture and history. On the one hand, the reasons behind this were practical: soon after the East India Company's conquest of Bengal in 1757, the British administrators started learning Sanskrit and Persian to gain knowledge about the conquered people, their history, habits and laws, in order to better govern the acquired territories. On the other hand, there were also scholars with genuine interest in Indian culture, who expanded their study beyond mere administrative requirements and into classical Indian literature/s, philosophy and religion thus developing the scholarly fields known as Indology and Orientalism.<sup>[9]</sup> Orientalist scholars were soon publishing texts and translations, research journals emerged, and in 1784 the Asiatic Society of Bengal was founded to encourage these studies. In the nineteenth century, interest in Orientalism spread across the universities of Europe, most importantly in Germany, France and Britain, attracting also scholars with no direct contact with India. The philologists' discovery of affinities between Sanskrit and certain European languages was most significant for the Orientalists and led to studies on Indo-European heritage and a search for European origins in India.<sup>[10]</sup> Gyan Prakash notes how

This search and discovery of European origins in the India of Sanskrit, the Brahmins, and texts essentialized and distanced India in two ways. First, because it embodied Europe's childhood, India was temporally separated from Europe's present and made incapable of achieving "progress." As an eternal child detached altogether from time, India was construed as an external object available to Orientalist gaze. Second, composed of language and texts, India appeared to be unchanging and passive. [...] The India of the Orientalist's knowledge emerged as Europe's other, an essential and distanced entity knowable by the detached and distanced observer of the European Orientalist.<sup>[11]</sup>

Thus, while the Orientalist scholars and their audience were European, Indians became passive objects of study, to be spoken for and represented in Western texts written mainly for Western audiences. The separation of the Orientalist Western knower-decision-maker and the reified Indian subject resulted in the construction of a binary opposition between what was construed to be the masculine-rational and pragmatic-materialistic West and the feminine-sentimental and mystical-spiritual India. This in turn glossed over the role of (British) colonialism in enabling the production of Orientalist knowledge: instead of being seen as the result of British colonialism, Orientalism's binary opposition between Britain and India was seen to pre-date and justify it.<sup>[12]</sup>

Later in the nineteenth century, while the binary opposition between Europe and India, essentialism and distancing remained characteristic of Orientalism, the formerly revered sources of knowledge, Sanskrit texts and Brahmins, lost their attraction and were now, in the era of liberal ideas and politics in Europe, seen by liberal critics and reformers to explain India's lack of historical change, civilisation and good government.<sup>[13]</sup> Compared to modern Europe, India's

culture was viewed as stagnant, its political institutions undemocratic, and it seemed that rational thought and individualism were not valued in India as they were in Europe. [\[14\]](#) Romantic representations of India gave way to inquiries, surveys and reports on peasants, caste, male and female populations, customs, languages and religious practices as "[t]he old Orientalist, buried in texts and devoted to learning Sanskrit and Persian, was replaced by the official, the scholar, and the modernizer." [\[15\]](#)

This information, was, however, rarely incorporated in standard historical works, which still concentrated on "great men", on the rise and fall of dynasties and empires, with kings and other rulers in the centre of attention. Orientalist knowledge and the assumed superiority of the British/Western culture were used to justify British conquest and rule of India, and they were also evident in British histories of India, which were, in fact, premised on the assumption of the superiority of the British administration. In late nineteenth and early twentieth century, many historians were British administrators affected by notions of India as a land of unchanging, static society, despotic rulers and supine villages, which led them to believe that the British administration was changing Indian society for the better. [\[16\]](#)

In this imperial history-writing, the British were credited with "bringing to the subcontinent political unity, modern educational institutions, modern industries, modern nationalism, a rule of law, and so forth." [\[17\]](#) Liberal imperialist historians in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in general have seen that at the heart of British imperialism there was a liberalist spirit with a commitment to Indian self-government, which manifested itself in enlightened policies. [\[18\]](#) These were for the benefit of Indians, who were seen to need to acquire and internalise certain ideas and concepts, such as historical consciousness, before they would be ready to rule themselves. Indians needed to be educated and developed into being citizens first. Ranajit Guha asserts that colonialist and neo-colonialist historiographies describe "Indian nationalism as a sort of 'learning process' through which the native elite became involved in politics by trying to negotiate the maze of institutions and the corresponding cultural complex introduced by the colonial authorities in order to govern the country." [\[19\]](#)

In addition to democracy, even Indian nationhood and nationalism were seen to be achievements of the British conquest and administration of India in British colonial historiography. [\[20\]](#) India was seen to be fragmented, her people divided and in the consequent absence of a real Indian nation, nationalism to be the work of small elite minorities and any unity in India an achievement of the British. Indian nationalist historians rose to contest British interpretations of India's historical development in the late nineteenth century and opined that an entity articulated in terms of Indian nationhood had existed for centuries and their task was to write its history.

Tracing the history of Indian nationalist historiography in Bengal, Partha Chatterjee has noted that "by the 1870s, the principal elements were already in place for the writing of a nationalist history of India" [\[21\]](#), though the major impact of nationalist historiography was felt in the 1920s and 1930s, when it was important to emphasise the unity of the Indian nation. While Indian historians writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were influenced by the history-writing of the British administrators in that their standard work consisted mainly of dynastic histories, they also deviated from their British predecessors significantly in many respects. Instead of praising the British administration in India, most Indian historians saw, in a time when the national movement was rising, "that the Golden Age in India had existed prior to the coming of the British and that the ancient past of India was a particularly glorious period of her history." [\[22\]](#) Nationalist historians also sought to stress the political unity of India since ancient times and saw the origins of a modern nation in the ancient (Hindu) India. India was seen by nationalist historians, secularist and Hindu supremacist alike, to possess "a unitary self and a singular will that arose from its essence and was capable of autonomy and sovereignty." [\[23\]](#)

The emphasis on the unitary and singular historical nation has the potential and runs the risk of defining the nation as a(n ancient) Hindu one and excluding other communities, such as Muslims. Hindu nationalist interpretations did not go

unquestioned, but already in the late nineteenth century many of the themes employed by the late twentieth-century Hindu extremist politics were incorporated in the historical imagining of the Indian nation, and they became pronounced also in the communal atmosphere in the late 1930s and the 1940s. While ancient India was glorified, the medieval or Muslim period was seen by Hindu nationalists to have been a period of tyrannical Muslim rule, which brought decline and degeneration.<sup>[24]</sup> With the rise of Hindu nationalism since the 1980s, history has been rewritten from this politically and religiously motivated point of view. According to Romila Thapar, "[t]his rewriting is tied to two fundamental ideas: the one privileging the origins and identity of the majority community; the second proving that religious minorities are foreign and therefore cannot be the inheritors of the land."<sup>[25]</sup> In the twenty-first century, Indian (nationalist) historiography remains as politically contested a ground as ever.

### **The Influence and Contestation of European Meta-Narratives**

Despite challenging Orientalist knowledge and British interpretations of Indian history, nationalist historians accepted many of the patterns set by British historiographers. Dipesh Chakrabarty remarks that nationalist historiographers adopted the transition narrative that describes the transition from medieval to modern or feudal to capitalist, despotic to constitutional, and which is connected to "modern industry, technology, medicine, a quasi-bourgeois (though colonial) legal system supported by a state [...]". He goes on to assert that "To think this narrative was to think these institutions at the apex of which sat the modern state, and to think the modern or the nation state was to think a history whose theoretical subject was Europe."<sup>[26]</sup> Thus, as Gyan Prakash notes, although nationalist historians subverted the Orientalist paradigm and wrote of an active and changing India, capable of speaking for and representing itself, they conformed to the Western ideas of modernity, Progress and Reason and underwrote the notion of an essentialised and undivided India.<sup>[27]</sup> Subaltern Studies historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that

insofar as the academic discourse of history – that is, "history" as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university – is concerned, "Europe" remains the sovereign, theoretical subject of all histories, including the ones we call "Indian," "Chinese," "Kenyan," and so on. There is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be labelled "the history of Europe."<sup>[28]</sup>

In other words, theoretical knowledge about Europe is applicable to Third-world countries but not *vice versa*; European knowledge structures and theories are thus seen as universal whereas knowledge concerning the Third World is more local and practical. Chakrabarty has therefore called for a project of "provincialising Europe" which would mean, among other things, contesting the modern.<sup>[29]</sup> The Subaltern Studies historians in general have sought to address these issues since the early 1980s (the first volume of the Subaltern Studies -series was published in 1982).

The writers of Subaltern Studies are Indian and British Marxist historians who, in most cases, have first-world academic training or experience and are based in India, Britain or Australia. Historian Sugata Bose explains that

The *Subaltern Studies* series initially styled itself in opposition to the hegemony of colonial, and nationalist, state-centred histories. Reflecting the subsequent influence of post-modern or post-structuralist scholarship, the subalternists moved increasingly towards a 'communitarian' mode of historical writing, celebrating an indigenous religious 'fragment' as the true essence of India, in opposition of the 'cunning' of Post-Enlightenment modernity, and the hegemony of the nation state.<sup>[30]</sup>

Furthermore, they "use the perspective of the subaltern to fiercely combat the perspectives of colonialist knowledge in nationalist and mode-of production narratives."<sup>[31]</sup> They contend that the European metanarratives cannot simply be applied to the context of Indian history but new perspectives and methods need to be discovered. New methods and strategies are needed for subaltern pasts do not necessarily conform to modern understanding of history-writing or

dominant ways of writing histories. While Subaltern Studies historians have worked to write alternative histories of India in the field of historiography since the early 1980s without reverting to the European master narrative, Indian novelists in English have done some questioning and contesting of their own in the realm of historical fiction.

Novelists have the advantage that history-writing in novels is not bound by the same restricting (Western) conventions as in historiographical discourse is, whereas, as Chakrabarty argues,

So long as one operates within the discourse of "history" produced at the institutional site of the university, it is not possible simply to walk out of the deep collusion between "history" and the modernizing narrative(s) of citizenship, bourgeois public and private, and the nation state. "History" as a knowledge system is firmly embedded in institutional practices that invoke the nation state at every step. [32]

However, even if they are not bound by the conventions of historiography, at the outset it seems that it may not be much easier for novelists to disregard or shed the modernising narrative(s) when dealing with Indian history. After all, the birth of the novel and new prose-fiction in general has been seen to be connected with the coming of political modernity in India: the novel is based on ideas of individualism and democracy and a certain kind of realism or rationalism; [33] and as Benedict Anderson has noted, the novel has, along with the newspaper, been a form that has offered and been used as an arena "for 're-presenting' the *kind* of imagined political community that is the nation." [34] Furthermore, historiography and fictive realism have significant similarities, as Linda Hutcheon has pointed out:

They have both been seen to derive their force more from verisimilitude than from any objective truth; they are both identified as linguistic constructs, highly conventionalized in their narrative forms, and not at all transparent, either in terms of language or structure; and they appear to be equally intertextual, deploying the texts of the past within their own complex textuality. [35]

Both of them have traditionally also subscribed to the narrative linearity of the ideas of Progress and Reason. To break free from these constraints in the novel would require renewing the genre and experimenting with the form as well as content. To some extent, this kind of renewing and experimenting has happened and the classic fictive realism and/or rationalism that characterised Indian English writing has been challenged in the past few decades by, among other things, magic realism and post-modern playfulness, introduced into the Indian novel in English by Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*.

### **History in 'Post-Emergency' Indian English Novels**

Almost all literatures in major Indian languages have a long tradition using history as source material. T. N. Dhar points out that in the nineteenth century the rising interest in Indian past/s, stimulated by the British presence in the subcontinent and the example of the English tradition of historical fiction, generated "a steady increase in the conscious use of history" in Indian literatures, especially novels. [36] Indian twentieth-century history – with its twists and turns, triumphs and tragedies – offers a lot to draw upon for novelists with interest in Indian history. The fiction of the 1980s is especially interesting not just because of Rushdie's influence but also due to the disillusionment caused by the State of Emergency (1975-77) and the subsequent mushrooming of novels that engaged with recent Indian history and social and political criticism.

From the beginning of the 1980s till approximately mid-1990s, from Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* to Mukul Kesavan's *Looking Through Glass* (1995), there was an increased thematic interest in the public sphere of Indian society; many of the Indian English novels of the "post-Rushdie period" are concerned with national politics and history, with which the protagonists' individual lives are intertwined. Time and the state of affairs seem to have been ripe for broad-sweeping evaluations of the turbulent twentieth-century, and the novel in English offered an arena for this which was free of the restricting conventions of historiography; indeed an arena in which these conventions could be questioned

and challenged. Some of the most interesting Indian English novels of the period (from a historian's point of view) fall in the category of what Linda Hutcheon calls "historiographic metafiction", that is "novels that are intensely self-reflexive but that also both re-introduce historical context into metafiction and problematize the entire question of historical knowledge".<sup>[37]</sup> Hutcheon explains that historiographic metafiction

refutes the natural or common-sense methods of distinguishing between historical fact and fiction. It refuses the view that only history has a truth claim, both by questioning the ground of that claim in historiography and by asserting that both history and fiction are discourses, human constructs, signifying systems, and both derive their major claim to truth from that identity.<sup>[38]</sup>

Historiographic metafiction also poses questions about positivist and fictive realist history-writing, and makes conscious efforts to foreground and even problematise the process of recording history.

Some of the Indian English novelists engaging with Indian history in this 15-year period continued the realist tradition, like Vikram Seth in his *A Suitable Boy* (1993), but many others followed in Rushdie's footsteps into the realm of magic realism, mythopoeia and fantasy, often utilising his "fragmentary mode of story-telling [that] activates *multiple* conceptions of India and Indianness."<sup>[39]</sup> The idea of India is examined and explored and old verities of historiography are challenged in this fiction. In addition to *Midnight's Children*, these novels include, among others, I. Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* (1988) and Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). These three novels, which all deal with modern Indian history, problematise "the matter of India" and challenge and question some of the established conventions of traditional historical writing by using ancient Indian myths, oral tradition, digressive narrative techniques, and such literary means as satire, magic realism and/or metafictional devices. These experiments and innovations in technique reflect the 1980s' flirtation with postmodernism which, according to Robert Young, "could be said to mark not just the cultural effects of a new stage of 'late' capitalism, but the sense of loss of European history and culture as History and Culture, the loss of their unquestioned place at the centre of the world."<sup>[40]</sup> As Jon Mee notes, in the novel-as-history fiction of the 1980s and 1990s, "the Sanskrit principle of 'excessive saying' or *atyukti* seems to be at work. Not the least interesting aspect of this principle as it appears in these novels is that it is often explicitly defined against a western idea of historiography."<sup>[41]</sup>

So one could argue that mixed into this celebration of Indian tradition is the need to counter traditional Western ways of (re)presenting history, perhaps even to "provincialise Europe", and find new ways of narrating Indian pasts. Apparent in this fiction is the postmodern historical sense, which situates itself "outside associations of Enlightenment progress or development, idealist/Hegelian world-historical processes, or essentialized Marxist notions of history."<sup>[42]</sup> The novel in English seemed to offer an arena in which the conventions of historiography – and perhaps also Europe's dominant status as the subject of all histories as well – could be questioned and challenged and where the "loss of the sense of an absoluteness of any Western account of History"<sup>[43]</sup> involved in postmodernism, becomes a possibility of foregrounding India and offering an Indian alternative to European discourses. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is part of this postmodern questioning of the verities and conventions of representing history in fiction and historiography, which gained ground in the 1980s, in India as well as in the West.

Born in London in 1956, Shashi Tharoor grew up in India. He went to school in Bombay and Calcutta, where his father was working for a leading newspaper, but he spent school vacations in his ancestral village in Kerala. After graduating in 1975 with a BA degree in history from the highly prestigious St Stephen's College in Delhi, Tharoor moved to the United States to continue his studies. He first obtained an MA degree and then in 1978, at the age of twenty-two, a Ph.D. from the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy at Tufts University. Having completed his studies, Tharoor started working with the High Commissioner for Refugees at the United Nations, first in Singapore and then in Geneva. Since 1989, he has been a senior official at UN headquarters in New York, and is

currently the UN Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information. Alongside his career as a UN diplomat, Tharoor has exercised his talents as a writer: in addition to his published doctoral dissertation *Reasons of State: Political Development and India's Foreign Policy under Indira Gandhi 1966-1977* (1982), he is the author of four other works of non-fiction, three novels and a collection of short stories. Tharoor has also written for several magazines and newspapers, and currently has regular columns in the Indian newspapers *The Hindu* and *The Times of India*.

Tharoor has said of his writing: "I am a student of history and I am ... concerned with the recording of history. ... My work is ... conscious about the various ways that history can be told and recorded." [44] This is also one of the central themes of *The Great Indian Novel*, which, in addition to being a satirical narrativisation of twentieth-century Indian history in a mythological format borrowed from the *Mahabharata*, with figures such as Mahatma Gandhi and Jawaharlal Nehru corresponding to the characters of the ancient Indian epic, poses questions to Western historiographic tradition and problematises historical knowledge. The story of the *Mahabharata* provides the novel with the basic structure on which Tharoor has fitted a (hi)story of twentieth-century India, beginning from Mahatma Gandhi's return to India in 1915 and finishing with Indira Gandhi's second premiership in the early 1980s. The novel's narrator, Ved Vyas, or V.V., has been personally involved in the political life of the period, and then dictates, like the supposed composer of the *Mahabharata*, the story to a scribe. History does not just provide a backdrop for this novel, nor is it merely littered with historical signposts to put the story in time: history is the very content of *The Great Indian Novel*, even though it is presented using myth, fiction and satire.

### **Myth and History**

In the West, as Peter Heehs argues, "myth and history are often considered antithetical modes of explanation. [...] Since the Greeks, *logos* (word as demonstrable truth) has been opposed to *mythos* (word as authoritative pronouncement). [...] The general trend of post-Enlightenment historiography has been the eradication of myth from the record of "what really happened."" [45] In contrast, in India, there is an old cultural tradition that does not distinguish between history and mythology but blends them together as the ancient Indian epics exemplify, and as late as in the early nineteenth-century Bengali histories of India, for example, "Myth, history, and the contemporary – all become part of the same chronological sequence; one is not distinguished from another; the passage from one to another, consequently, is entirely unproblematical," [46] as Partha Chatterjee points out. In the twentieth century, this tradition was still very much alive, in oral tradition as well as in some Indian literature. As *The Great Indian Novel* blends myth and history, two different times operate in the very beginning of the novel: mythical time and historical time. V.V. starts by recounting the genealogy of the characters and the time of that myth-based genealogy does not match historical time (too many generations in too little time: if V.V. "was born with the century", his children can hardly be grown-up men in the early 1920s as suggested by the historical time). Once the genealogy is cleared and the actual (hi)story gets going, mythical time gives way to historical time, which is then followed throughout the novel.

If realism "represents all that is synonymous with Western-style 'progress': rationalism, materialism, industrialism, technological innovation" [47], *The Great Indian Novel*, with its metafictional devices, oral narrative and basic structure of myth, which, in contrast, is associated with the past, tradition, religious beliefs, mysticism and ahistoricity/stasis, offers a powerful counter-(hi)story of India and an effective way of questioning Europe's hegemony in prose writing, history as well as novels. While positivist historiography makes a clear distinction between history and myth, Tharoor's novel invokes popular Indian myths in his representation of history, thus challenging this tradition of history-writing, in Indian context at the very least, and the knowledge it produces. Whereas fictive historical realism follows the same conventions as Western-style (positivist) historiography, historiographical metafiction foregrounds the act of recording and narrativising history to question these

conventions and problematise this model of writing history. In V.V.'s narration, this happens by the means that, according to Hutcheon, are commonly used in post-modern historiography and fiction: "there is a deliberate contamination of the historical with didactic and situational discursive elements, thereby challenging the implied assumptions of historical statements: objectivity, neutrality, impersonality, and transparency of representation." [48]

From the very beginning the narrator of this (hi)story of India is identified, that is, there is a clear and visible narrator, and the act of narration itself, the narrativisation of history and V.V.'s ponderings about recording and representing history are made part of the story that is being told. Dictating to a scribe, V.V. addresses his listener, and through him, the reading audience directly, which creates an effect of defamiliarisation: the listeners/readers are not immersed in a seemingly factual, objective and transparent account of twentieth-century Indian history but are listening to/reading an account, which makes its audience acutely aware of the act of narration taking place. As opposed to the seemingly objective Western nineteenth- and twentieth-century historiographical narration in which, in the words of Emile Benveniste, "truly there is no longer a 'narrator.' The events are chronologically recorded as they appear on the horizon of the story. No one speaks. The events seem to tell themselves." [49] Tharoor's V.V. tells a subjective story of twentieth-century Indian history, based on his own experiences.

The very objectivity of historical writing is also called into question, as "the facts" on which the depiction and interpretation of many of the incidents and events in *The Great Indian Novel* are based are rumours, hearsay, second-hand information and guesses. V.V. openly admits the subjectivity of his account and at the same time implies that all accounts of history are subjective:

It is my truth, Ganapathi, just as the crusade to drive out the British reflected Gangaji's truth, and the fight to be rid of both the British and the Hindu was Karna's truth. Which philosopher would dare to establish a hierarchy among such verities? Question, Ganapathi. Is it permissible to modify truth with a possessive pronoun? Questions Two and Three. How much may one select, interpret and arrange facts of the living past before truth is jeopardized by inaccuracy? [50]

And further:

For every tale I have told you, every perception I have conveyed, there are a hundred equally valid alternatives I have omitted and of which you are unaware. I make no apologies for this. This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine. But you cannot derive your cosmogony from a single birth, Ganapathi. Every Indian must for ever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India. [51]

What he says is that there is no one, indubitable Truth; no one true, objective account of any period of history. In this, *The Great Indian Novel* is like other postmodern narratives, which, according to Linda Hutcheon, "imply that there are only truths in the plural, and never one truth; and there is rarely falseness *per se*, just other truths." [52] India's past contains millions of stories, millions of ways of narrating them, and V.V. underlines that his story is only one of the possible histories of twentieth-century India, not an absolute or conclusive account of this period. The actual events of history can be made to constitute different stories, depending on the biases, selections, omissions and distortions of the historian.

The character of V.V.'s historiographical position is analogous with that of the ideas of scholars like Hayden White on the writing of history: the historical facts contain an "infinite number" of stories, "all different in their details, each unlike every other." The historian must figure out what kind of stories might be found in the "facts" and what kinds of plot-structure ought to be used to make the story coherent; the meaning of the events is elicited from the story-structure that is imposed on them. White states "the historian must draw upon a fund of culturally provided *mythoi* in order to constitute the facts as figuring a story of a particular kind, just as he must appeal to that same fund of *mythoi* in the minds of his readers to endow his account of the past with the odor of meaning or



significance.” [53] In *The Great Indian Novel*, Indian history is approached from a different angle *vis-à-vis* Western historiography or realist fiction, for Tharoor draws upon Indian myths, epic and Puranic frameworks, and builds on a mythic story-structure to compose a narrative of the chosen facts of twentieth-century Indian history.

Building on ancient Indian texts and textual-narratological models endows the history of twentieth-century India with a very different meaning than Western-style post-Enlightenment historiography. The defining characters of twentieth-century Indian history are encountered in a new light, one cast through the prism of well-known mythic figures, which adds to their personalities and perhaps tells something new about these well-known historical figures and events, thus challenging the old and conventional ways of looking at them. This way the *Mahabharata* functions as a structure that opens up twentieth-century Indian history anew to Indian readers, and reclaims Indian history through the act of telling it by using Indian narrative strategies and presenting the twentieth century as a continuation of the ancient Indian tradition and not a disruption by the modern.

Furthermore, as the extensive use of the *Mahabharata* in *The Great Indian Novel* connects modern India with its ancient past, its traditions, cultural heritage and recording of history, it also emphasises and highlights Indian tradition in the telling of Indian history and thus brings something of Indian heritage to Western readers. Indian history is told here not only from an Indian perspective but by utilising India’s cultural heritage in its structure and form. The use and recycling of Indian mythopoeic traditions to write the country’s modern histories counters the Western historiographical ideas of linear time and progress that have usually been employed in the historiography of twentieth-century India, for while the events of the *Mahabharata* took place in the remote past, they still have a contemporary relevance; the figures of the epic are archetypes that can be rediscovered in, say, twentieth-century Indian history, as *The Great Indian Novel* demonstrates. It is almost as if history repeats itself, for even though the historical contexts change, the basic structures remain the same or at least occur repeatedly.

### **Progress and Reason Repudiated?**

Even the narrative structure of traditional Western historiography is challenged, for, whereas in the Western narrativising historical discourse stories about the past have well-marked beginning, middle and end phases, V.V.’s remark to his scribe foregrounds an alternative way of looking at life and history: “There is, in short, Ganapathi, no *end* to the story of life. There are merely pauses. The end is the arbitrary invention of the teller, but there can be no finality about his choice. Today’s end is, after all, only tomorrow’s beginning.” [54] V.V. seems to suggest that since history itself is not conclusive and teleological, historical narratives should not be so either, and thus questions the suitability of European histories’ master-narrative to at least the Indian context. The inconclusive nature of writing history is emphasised when he feels, at the end of his story, that he has told it “from a completely mistaken perspective”, and therefore needs to start anew. [55]

What Ankersmit expected postmodern historiography to bring about, the realisation that the leitmotifs of Western post-Enlightenment historiography, “the triumph of Reason, the glorious struggle for emancipation of the nineteenth-century workers’ proletariat, are only of local importance and for that reason can no longer be suitable metanarratives,” [56] can be found in *The Great Indian Novel*, too. There is a suggestion that European models of historiography are historically and culturally relative, no longer the necessary master-narrative of all histories, and the old essentialist, teleological and conclusive aspirations of fiction and history-writing are challenged.

Western ideas of Reason and Progress in history and historiography are repudiated already on the first page of the novel when V.V. states: “India is not an underdeveloped country but a highly developed one in an advanced state of decay.” [57] Implicit in this statement seems to be the idea that cultures and

civilisations come and go, rise and fall, cyclically, that there is no linear progress and that the coming to India of political modernity certainly did not start India's progress to becoming a developed country, but marks just another phase in the long history of India. On the level of historical meta-narrative, V.V./Tharoor then rejects Western historical narratives of Progress and Reason and offers an Indian alternative. Here the novel is involved in and influenced by, although presenting an Indian version of, the postmodern questioning of the verities and conventions of representing history in fiction and historiography, and "the sense of loss of European history and culture as History and Culture", which gained ground in the West in the 1980s. In *The Great Indian Novel*, these can be seen in Tharoor's postcolonial and postmodern agenda of reclaiming India's history and suggesting Indian alternatives of recording history. This does not mean substituting facts with myths but freeing historiography from its Euro-centric constraints. European meta-narratives cannot be readily applied to Indian history since European history, concept of time and narrative models are also historically and culturally relative as opposed to the universal or absolute truths as which they have often been used.

On another level, on the level of 'historical reality', V.V./Tharoor mostly follows the chronological order of historical events, and like Salman Rushdie, who as Ralph J. Crane opines, "allows[, despite digressions,] the linear narrative to assert the authority of time-history" in *Midnight's Children*,<sup>[58]</sup> Tharoor uses linear narrative to convey his (hi)story of twentieth-century India. However, even the events leading to India's independence are "a cathartic process of regeneration, another stage in this endless cycle" as V.V. describes them, and the history of India "a flowing dance of creation and evolution".<sup>[59]</sup>

Thus, the chronological order of events and narrative linearity do not mean conforming to the European meta-narrative, but are just an extract of an "endless cycle" with no beginning or end. V.V. explains the "instinctive Indian sense that nothing begins and nothing ends. That we are all living in an eternal present in which what was and what will be is contained in what is. Or, to put in a more contemporary idiom, that life is a series of sequels to history."<sup>[60]</sup> As was pointed out earlier, there is a difference between Indian and Western notions of history. According to Ashis Nandy: "If for the West the present was a special case of unfolding history, for Gandhi as a representative of traditional India, history was a special case of an all-embracing permanent present, waiting to be interpreted and reinterpreted."<sup>[61]</sup> This is the underlying philosophy of *The Great Indian Novel*, too, in which V.V. is interpreting history as a part of an eternal present as opposed to the (Western) teleological and conclusive interpretations.

### **Tradition and Modernity**

However, on the level of 'historical reality', Tharoor also embraces many of the ideas connected with political modernity: despite the questioning of historical knowledge and foregrounding of Indian tradition, *The Great Indian Novel* follows Western narratives, in historical fiction and historiography, in that the nation-state figures prominently in it. The novel depicts the decades leading to India becoming a nation-state and the world's largest democracy and the first three decades of their existence. Draupadi Mokrasi, or democracy, of mixed Indian and British parentage, is the character "whose life gives meaning to the rest of [the] story" after independence.<sup>[62]</sup> India's industrial and technological efforts are included as well. And yet Tharoor's work resembles in some ways Dipesh Chakrabarty's attempt to "provincialise Europe". According to Chakrabarty,

To attempt to provincialize this "Europe" is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of "tradition" that "modernity" creates.<sup>[63]</sup>

*The Great Indian Novel* privileges the ancient narrative of the *Mahabharata* and even uses that to challenge the Western discourse of Progress and linear history. True, *The Great Indian Novel* is in V.V.'s words, "the story of an entire nation"<sup>[64]</sup>, where the concept of the Indian 'nation' is a given in the novel, and the narrative of citizenship inevitably plays a role especially in the latter,

post-Independence part, but perhaps a different role than in the European narrative.

Primarily, *The Great Indian Novel* is a story of a nation and a nation-state, an articulation of an idea of India, presented in this fictional form to an audience of English-speaking readers inside and out of India's borders. Here, the use of the *Mahabharata* serves another function as well: to forge national unity in a disintegrating Indian society. In both his fiction and non-fiction, Shashi Tharoor is notably concerned about the fragmentation of Indian society, and speaks passionately in favour of Indian pluralism. In *The Great Indian Novel*, V.V. explains: "I have portrayed a nation in struggle but omitted its struggles against itself, ignoring the regionalists and autonomists and separatists and secessionists who even today are trying to tear the country apart. To me, Ganapathi, they are of no consequence in the story of India; they seek to diminish something that is far greater than they will ever comprehend."[\[65\]](#)

I would argue that Tharoor's use of the 'known-by-virtually-every-Indian epic', the shared cultural element, in *The Great Indian Novel*, as a vehicle to tell a story of India's national struggle for independence and the creation and maintenance of the world's largest democracy, is a device by which he can also remind his Indian readers of the shared national struggle, of the common project of keeping India democratic and pluralistic. If one looks at the use of the *Mahabharata* from this perspective, even the concept of the nation in the novel acquires new shades. Anthropologist K.S. Singh says: "A remarkable feature of the Mahābhārata from an anthropological angle is that it presents in its present form a grand assembly of all ethnic groups and of the peoples of all territories constituting almost the whole of Bharat."[\[66\]](#) Singh continues:

the present day Mahābhārata consist[s] of 125,000 verses, as stories and legends churned out by various communities and territorial groups were incorporated into this corpus. This is probably the finest example of the making of the consciousness of a people, of a civilisation and of a moral order, from the interaction of various communities and their cultures in the geographical area lying south of the Himalayas and bounded by the oceans.[\[67\]](#)

By using the *Mahabharata* as a vehicle for telling the (hi)story of the Indian nation in the twentieth century, Tharoor reaches for a cultural form and content that are shared and that thus unify "almost the whole of Bharat". Seen in this light, through the medium of the *Mahabharata*, the "nation in struggle" in *The Great Indian Novel* is not so much a product of British intervention, modern nationalism and the coming of political modernity but is rather a people "in the geographical area lying south of the Himalayas and bounded by the oceans" that share Indian civilisation. It is not primarily a modern nation but a subcontinent of people sharing certain cultural elements, texts and traditions that just enters a new (passing) phase in its existence, the phase of a modern political nation state that comes into existence in Independence.

As Sunil Khilnani points out, pre-colonial India, though geographically encompassing dissimilar agrarian regions, comprised such shared elements as the complexity of the caste system, common aesthetic and architectural styles, myths and ritual motifs, which rested on the Brahminic order that regulated social relationships.[\[68\]](#) He argues that "shared narrative structures embodied in epics, myths and folk stories, and the family resemblance in styles of art, architecture and religious motifs – if not ritual practices – testify to a civilizational bond".[\[69\]](#) It is this civilisational bond that the use of the *Mahabharata* evokes. The epic encompasses the whole of the Indian subcontinent, and therein lies its unifying force, a force which Tharoor employs in his (hi)story of the Indian nation.

The *Mahabharata* with its intertwining of myth and history, its religious beliefs and certain perpetuity could be seen as anti-modern and its use in this novel definitely invokes Indian tradition in the form of the epic in telling the story of twentieth-century India. Yet Tharoor also questions some of this tradition and rewrites it in the modern context, thus mirroring the *Mahabharata* that has so often been re-written. In his analysis of *The Great Indian Novel*, Viney Kirpal writes: Tharoor attempts "to counter the crushing burden of tradition and history (The *Mahabharata* is considered as *itihaas*). Yet he also sees the essence

behind the epic, an essence that continues to be of great relevance to contemporary India.” [70]

It is this essence that is yoked to history to emphasise the point that “we are all living in an eternal present in which what was and what will be is contained in what is.” [71] The past is not separate from the present, it is not something which is over but has a contemporary relevance. Tradition here offers a counterpoint to modernity, though Tharoor does not accept the former as such either, but questions it: for example, Tharoor himself says that “the Ekalavya story (where the boy cuts off his thumb at Drona’s request) *had* to be changed to make a 20<sup>th</sup> century point.” [72] In *The Great Indian Novel*, Ekalavya refuses to cut off his thumb since this would endanger his own and his mother’s future. [73] Another enlightening example of rewriting tradition is the modernised and watered-down version of the sati of Madri as an inoffensive coincidence. [74] Thus, “through a multilayered treatment, the novelist both questions the ethics of tradition and evokes the essential *Mahabharata* to understand the persisting orthodoxy in present day India.” [75] Tradition is invoked and myth yoked to history to tell a story of twentieth-century India. However, tradition is not unconditionally accepted in order to just pitch it against Western fictional and historiographical narratives of India; it is used selectively and re-written where necessary to make a twentieth-century point.

Similarly, Hindu religious tradition is criticised where Tharoor sees the need for that. Though V.V. states, “I have been, on the whole, a good Hindu in my story” [76], he also notes:

Our philosophers try to make much of our great Vedic religion by pointing to its spiritualism, its pacifism, its lofty pansophism; and they ignore, or gloss over, its superstitions, its inequalities, its obscurantism. That is quite typical. Indeed one may say it is quite typically Hindu. Hinduism is the religion of over 80 per cent of Indians, and as a way of life it pervades almost all things Indian, bringing to politics, work and social relations the same flexibility of doctrine, reverence for custom and absorptive eclecticism that characterize the religion – as well as the same tendency to respect outworn dogma, worship sacred cows and offer undue deference to gurus. Not to mention its great ability to overlook – or transcend – the inconvenient truth. [77]

Significantly then, tradition here does not quite work as the antithesis of modernity, rather, Tharoor negotiates between tradition and modernity, rescuing the relevant parts of the former – signified here by the epic – and questioning those parts that seem outdated or otherwise not fitting in the twentieth-century context. Thus both Indian tradition and Western modernity are contested.

### **Concluding Remarks**

*The Great Indian Novel* reclaims Indian history by using Indian myths, narrative strategies and tradition in its portrayal, and foregrounds India by showcasing her literary heritage, philosophy, myths, tradition and culture to an international English-speaking audience and poses a challenge to the realist and traditional historiographic means of representing Indian history. Tharoor’s novel is a work of fiction and therefore not bound by the conventions of academic historiography; yet his (hi)story of twentieth century India offers an alternative and complementary view to “academic” histories. It contains same (kind of) “facts” as historiography but presents and interprets them through alternative narrative models reminding readers of the Euro-centricity of much of history-writing, in realist fiction as well as historiography.

In *The Great Indian Novel* Western historical discourse is variegated with Indian elements, and mythopoeia is used to challenge both the transition-narrative of modernity and traditional history-writing. However, political modernity and the ideational modern are not subverted but blended into Indian history. Like the narrator’s Hinduism, his (hi)story of India is tolerant and open to influences, which he then blends in as a part of the Indian fabric of life. *The Great Indian Novel* is a story of India told in an Indian voice, which foregrounds Indian heritage by highlighting myths and the typically-Indian concept of the cyclical nature of time and history, in problematising Indian history. Although Tharoor seems to accept and embrace what political modernity brings with itself: nation,

democracy, technological innovation and so forth, he does not impose a European master-narrative on Indian history but puts all this in an Indian perspective, as part of the fluctuation of Indian society. V.V. says to his scribe:

History, Ganapathi – indeed the world, the universe, all human life, and so, too, every institution under which we live – is in a constant state of evolution. The world and everything in it is being created and re-created even as I speak, each hour, each day, each week, going through the unending process of birth and rebirth which has made us all. India has been born and reborn scores of times, and it will be reborn again. India is for ever; and India is forever being made. [\[78\]](#)

The history of India does not follow linear progression and therefore V.V.'s (hi)story of India does not follow the European master-narrative of linear Progress and Reason; rather it follows the concepts of *karma* and *dharma*. The superstructure of the nation-state does not essentially change the "eternal India", India does not "progress" and move into Western linear time but keeps its circular time. V.V.'s statement "India is for ever" and "is forever being made" seems to imply that India will exist even when political modernity is gone, just as India existed before political modernity came to India. Whereas in (Western) teleological history models Progress has brought about modernity and the modern nation state, which are seen as an integral part of the development of Western/Euro-American civilisation and history, the same – modernity and the modern nation state – in India are just a passing phase of history, a surface structure on the deeper civilisational ties. Similarly, while state is central in the story of the Indian nation in *The Great Indian Novel*, Indian civilisation is more so; it is India as civilisation, not as state, that is eternal, as history has shown; political modernity and the nation-state are only the current stage of the evolution, the stage that *The Great Indian Novel* examines.

*Kirjoittaja on filosofian lisensiaatti, joka valmistelee Turun yliopistossa väitöskirjaansa intialaisen englanninkielisen kirjallisuuden historian representaatioista.*

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[1]\_Walder 1998, 103.

[2]\_Tharoor 2005, 25.

[3]\_Shah 2003, 26.

[4]\_Nandy 2004, 59.

[5]\_Dhar 1999, 61.

[6]\_Kosambi 1985, 2.

[7]\_Majumdar 1970, 6.

[8]\_Dhar 1999, 67.

[9]\_See Thapar 1968, 318-319 and Prakash 1990, 385-386. Orientalism, a much discussed and controversial field, is the subject of Edward Said's study *Orientalism* (first published in 1978), in which he gives three definitions of the term: first, Orientalism can be simply defined as "an academic tradition of anyone who studies the Orient". Second, Said defines Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident'." The third definition envisages Orientalism as a discourse: "taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient – dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient." Said 2003, 2-3.

[10]\_Thapar 1968, 318-319; Prakash 1990, 385-386.

[11]\_Prakash 1990, 386.

[12]\_Prakash 1990, 384-385.

[13]\_Prakash 1990, 386.

[14]\_Thapar 1984, 16.

[15]\_Prakash 1990, 387; see also Thapar 1968, 325.

[16]\_Thapar 1968, 322-323.

[17]\_Chakrabarty 2000b, 11.

[18]\_See Hubel 1996, 73-74.

[19]\_Guha 1986, 2.

[20]\_Ahmad 1996, 278-279; see also Hubel 1996, 32, 78, 92.

[21]\_Chatterjee 1992, 123.

[22]\_Thapar 1984, 17.

[23]\_Prakash 1990, 389.

[24]\_See Thapar 1968, 329; Prakash 1990, 389; Chatterjee 1992, 140.

[25]\_Thapar 2005, 198.

[26]\_Chakrabarty 1992, 8.

[27]\_Prakash 1990, 391.

[28]\_Chakrabarty 1992, 1.

[29]\_Chakrabarty 1992, 23.

[30]\_Bose 2003, 135.

[31]\_Prakash 1992, 8-9.

[32]\_Chakrabarty 1992, 19.

[33]\_See Chakrabarty 2000a, 153-155.

[34]\_See Anderson 1991, 6, 25.

[35]\_Hutcheon 1987, 285.

[36]\_Dhar 1999, 74.

- [37]\_Hutcheon 1987, 285-286.
- [38]\_Hutcheon 1996, 93.
- [39]\_Singh 1996, 169.
- [40]\_Young 1990, 20.
- [41]\_Mee 2000, 104.
- [42]\_Hutcheon 1996, 92.
- [43]\_Young 1990, 19.
- [44]\_Tharoor in Kanaganayakam 1995, 121.
- [45]\_Heehs 1994.
- [46]\_Chatterjee 1992, 117.
- [47]\_Afzal-Khan 1993, 25.
- [48]\_Hutcheon 1996, 92.
- [49]\_Quoted in Genette 1978, 9.
- [50]\_The Great Indian Novel, henceforth GIN, 164.
- [51]\_GIN, 373.
- [52]\_Hutcheon 1987, 290.
- [53]\_White 1987, 60.
- [54]\_GIN, 163.
- [55]\_GIN, 418.
- [56]\_Ankersmit 1989, 150.
- [57]\_GIN, 17.
- [58]\_Crane 1992, 188.
- [59]\_GIN, 245.
- [60]\_GIN, 163.
- [61]\_Nandy 2004, 57.
- [62]\_GIN, 246.
- [63]\_Chakrabarty 1992, 23.
- [64]\_GIN, 93.
- [65]\_GIN, 112.
- [66]\_Singh 1993, 7.
- [67]\_Singh 1993, 8.
- [68]\_Khilnani 2001, 19.
- [69]\_Khilnani 2001, 155.
- [70]\_Kirpal 1990, 47.
- [71]\_GIN, 163.
- [72]\_Tharoor 1990, 7.
- [73]\_GIN, 198-199.
- [74]\_GIN, 190-191.
- [75]\_Kirpal 1990, 47-48.
- [76]\_GIN, 112.
- [77]\_GIN, 412.
- [78]\_GIN, 245.



