

## **A Comparative Study of History in Shashi Tharoor's Novels & Amitav Ghosh's Novels**

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**Abstract:** -The research article focuses on the comparative study of history of Shashi Tharoor and Amitav Ghosh will be discussed in a comparative perspective. All the writers had incorporated the history of Indian subcontinent in fictional terms but the way of presentation is different. Same event from the history has been re-presented in plurality. This article will try to evaluate the novels by cross referring the depiction of the particular event in different novels side by side. The endeavor in this article will be to explore the thematic and technical aspects of each novel in a comparative framework. The article provides comprehensive view of socio-political and cultural reality of Indian subcontinent as discussed in the fiction.

**Key words:** - History, thematic and technical aspects, socio-political and cultural.

**Introduction:** - Relevance of the present study and Scope for further research will also be mentioned in this article. By studying these novels of contemporary novelists from this perspective and examining them finally in a comparative framework we will be in a position to understand socio-political and cultural issues of Indian subcontinent in deeper and better way. Further, such a study will also explore some of the important areas of meaning that have not been touched upon before. It will also reinforce our understanding of the contemporary socio-political, cultural and economic issues of Indian subcontinent.

History and politics of the period are presented through daily and domestic life of the four families, through their relatives and acquaintances, projecting fictional characters that

influence the political events in turns being affected by them, through historical figures and also through fictional representative of historical figures. The article has discussed social framework of the period, the life in the country just after the independence, traditional marriage system, land reform bill, discrimination on the basis of caste and religion. The changes going on in the political sphere of the country in Nehru's era, relating to the rift in the Congress party, general election, the issue of abuse of power which have crept in to the politics of have been discussed.

The article has dealt with the issue of communal disharmony and communalization of politics depicted through fictional riot and fictional recreation of Ayodhya conflict in the novel. It has provided a comprehensive view of socio-political and cultural reality of the Indian subcontinent as represented in the selected novels by these two writers. The article discusses selection of a period, mode of representing historical framework and method of narrating events which differ in each of the novel. The individual mode of writing histories in both the novels re-narrates histories of the Indian Subcontinent, intermixing individual histories with public history of the nation.

The mythical mode of writing history in *The Great Indian Novel* re-narrates history from 1915 to 1980. The historical incidents and characters in these novels are looked from the point of view of the impact they need left upon the lives of individual, families, communities and ultimately on the state. Various problems grappling the nation are seen from various perspectives and these perspectives have led us to understand the reality in deeper and clearer way. They differ from each other in their treatment and technique which provide their representation of the past a different angle for the reader to look at past. The various perspectives provide readers a chance to

know historical events, figures and periods during a more comprehensive and objective way. While dealing with the pages of history, the same historical events have been given different connotations and meanings by these writers.

Representation of history in their novels has also focused on the socio-political and cultural dimensions of the historical events. This also enhances our understanding of socio-political and cultural realities of the Indian subcontinent. The differences and similar aspects of the authors in representing the history in their works are thus discussed here. This article will explore how Tharoor and Ghosh are historical writers on the foundation of the discussions, explorations and evaluations made in the previous articles. It would also initiate more researches in the area discussed in the current study.

Further, such a study will also explore some of the important areas of meaning that have not been touched upon before. It will also reinforce our understanding of the contemporary socio-political, cultural and economic issues of Indian subcontinent. The novel of the eighties sets the tenor for a new thrust in Indian English fiction. It has left a lasting imprint on Indian English fiction and is taken as the starting point of a whole generation of new writers called Ghosh generation.

These novelists who have published their first novels in the mid-eighties or early nineties have brought a new internationalism to their fiction and a contemporaneity to their outlook with a daring experimentation in form and structure while at the same time wiping out the linguistic barriers that inhibited the earlier novelists. Most of them belong to the urban milieu. Firdaus Kanga, the author of *Trying to Grow and Heaven on Wheels*, while analyzing the progress of these writers and what one would expect of them in 1993, comments that the prospect of the new crop of writers making a distinct mark on world

literary scene with their rich cultural heritage and language control is not a far-off proposition: In fact, the two most promising fields for writing in English lie in India and South Africa. Both have the richness of the two of the richest of cultures to draw from.

In the recent times, a great body of historical fiction has emerged on the literary scene. A close study of the contemporary novel reveals the writer's preoccupation with our historic past and the unabated interest of the readers in the novels that depict the past or that treat some event of national import that has had wide repercussions. An historical novel is nothing but an evaluation of a segment of historical reality as projected by the novelist whose techniques of writing fiction enable him to describe his vision or world-vision. Indeed, he injects a new dimension into his encounter with history.

The Indian English novelists were most responsive to the call of equality, freedom and human rights, for the literary artists have an intrinsic quality and ability to look beyond their time. It is they who hold before the common man a lenses, as it were, through which he could see what threatened him socially, culturally or politically, and which made him aware of the precipice that lay ahead. As it was, a number of novels were written during the period that portrayed the unjustness of the British rule and the grim fight the people were determined to give to get rid of it. Politics became synonymous with nationalism.

Tharoor's endeavors to present history of India in his fiction "emblemizes the preoccupation with re-viewing history obtaining in Post-colonial writings" (Salat 127). *The Great Indian Novel* retells history of the period of Indian freedom struggle and three decades after independence in mythical guise. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is satirical and periodic rewriting of twentieth century India on the structure of great Hindu epic the *Mahabharata*. History of British colonial India and its subsequent history after

Independence till 1980 are retold as the story of the *Mahabharata*. In retelling, it sets "out to explore what has made India and nearly unmade it, and to consider the nature of truth in life as in fiction, in tradition as in history" (BIB 23).

At the same time *The Great Indian Novel* "opposes Imperial history and tells the story of India's colonization from a perspective that decanters the colonizers and foregrounds Indians and Indian systems" (101). His attempt of yoking of myth to history in a way is "a post-colonial reply to the colonial consciousness" (Shah 93). Helen Tiffin writes that the main aim of post-colonial writing is to "establish or rehabilitate self against either European appropriation or rejection" (Mishra 14). It is done through adopting number of strategies. Post-Colonial writers with strong indigenous traditions and well-developed metaphysical systems in India, Africa and Australia use their cultures to challenge European master narrative of history.

Tharoor turns to strong cultural tradition of India to thematize history of modern India in the light of its ancient past and negates the European negation of India's culture and tradition. Tharoor himself opines that the task of *The Great Indian Novel* is "to affirm and enhance an Indian cultural identity, to broaden understanding of the Indian cultural and historical heritage and to reclaim for Indians the story of India's national experience and its own reassertion of itself, including the triumphs and disappointments of independence" (What the Novel 5).

Myth and history are considered oppositional in the traditional western concept of history but in India they are not considered oppositional but blended together as Partha Chatterjee points out: "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 unproblematic" (117). Myth, legendary characters and oral tales have contemporary relevance. They help us in understanding present and future of our existence. Tharoor blends myth and history to understand the postcolonial India in the matrix of its past.

Tharoor wanted a vehicle to express his idea about India. He found the *Mahabharata* as a perfect vehicle because its "characters and personages still march triumphantly in Indian minds; its myths and legends still inspire the Indian imagination; its events still speak to Indians with a contemporary resonance rare in many twentieth century works" (BIB 18). So he used the *Mahabharata* as a framework "to retell the political history of the twentieth-century India, through, a fictional recasting of its events, episodes and characters (BIB, 15). To narrate the political history of the twentieth century India, Tharoor draws heavily from the structure of the *Mahabharata* which enables him to critically evaluate social and political reality of the country.

The novel derives its title from the great epic as 'Maha' means 'Great' and 'Bharat' mean 'India'. Not only its title, but also the "entire work draws heavily from it and in its formal/narrative structure, metaphorically parallels the great epic's mode and methodology" (Salat 127). The eighteen chapters of the novel are modeled on the eighteen parvas of the epic and their title alludes to well known literary works written on India like "The Duel with the Crown", "Passages Through India", "Midnight's Parents", "The Rigged Veda" etc. In his satirical and periodic reworking, events and characters from the history of India are recanted in mythical garb. Tharoor himself confessed in the "Afterword" of the novel: "Many of the characters, incidents and issues in the novel are based on people and events described in the great epic the *Mahabharata* ..." (419).

The characters from the Indian history are presented in such a way that they look like character of the *Mahabharata* but with some change that they seem fit into "the Song of Modern India" (18). V.V. and Ganapati refers to the author of the epic Ved Vyas and lord Ganesha respectively.

The *Mahabharata* is "a work which remains a perennial source of delight and inspiration to millions in India" (419). The issues rose in the epic and the values promoted through it have contemporary relevance and are essential to understand Indian reality. The epic narrates dynastic struggle between Kauravas and Pandavas which led to the battle of Kurukshetra. The idea which Tharoor wants to emphasize is that this battle of Kurukshetra never ends As V.V., the narrator elaborates: "... life is Kurukshetra. History is Kurukshetra. The struggle between *dharma* and *adharma* is a struggle of our nation, and each of us in it, engages in on every single day of our existence" (391).

As a writer, Amitav Ghosh has been immensely influenced by the political and social milieu of the country. He also admits that his campus life and travels within and without the country contributed to his development as a creative writer. The style is multidimensional, ironic and a mixture of the bizarre and the ordinary. It abounds in stories, odd characters, frightful journeys and strange happenings. There is the conflict between reason and superstition, mind and feeling, criminality and the law and the collective and the individual.

Amitav Ghosh has evolved a style and approach to his material distinctively his own. His fictional and nonfictional work mixes history, philosophy, science, literature, ethnography and folk culture on the one hand, and the picaresque narrative, travelogue, the novel of social commentary, fable, folktale, and popular culture genres such as detective

fiction on the other. A postmodern writer in many respects, Ghosh is also a humanist. The newly, revised version of history that has taken a bold step to challenge the so called mainstream history is what is depicted in Amitav Ghosh's famous work *The Glass Palace*. The author has cleverly presented his point of view that though every society has its own history; the individual has his own share to contribute towards the greater history.

'The Glass Palace' is a fine example of Amitav Ghosh's writing where he arranges the matter and links it to history. The novel is based on the military career of the writer's father and uncle's life as a trader in Burma. It covers the interrelated experience of three families in Burma, India and British Malaya from 1885 to the present time. Ghosh confesses in his 'Author's notes': I read hundred of books, memoirs, travelogues, gazetteers, articles and notebooks, published and unpublished; I travelled thousands of miles, visiting and revisiting, so far as possible, all the setting and location that figure in this novel, I sought out scores of people in India Malaysia Myanmar and Thailand (Ghosh:2000,p249).

Amitav Ghosh has projected the Gandhian Philosophy very beautifully through the character of Uma who is the widow of the collector of Ratnagiri. Uma follows the Gandhian thought and tries to apply it in solving the day to day problems. Uma deeply absorbs Ghandhiji's problems of Indian society very well. In her views imperialism is not a form of reform: "Let me be the first to admit the horrors of our own society – As a woman I assure you that I am even more aware of them than you are. Mahatma Gandhi has always said that our struggle for reform. But having said this let me add that we must not be deceived by the idea that imperialism is not an enterprise of reform." (2000: p.294).

The conflict between cultures may be taken as the ironic conflation of nationalities which is dramatically introduced in the beginning of the novel. The moment of Rajkumar's

'chance' presence in Mandalay, seat of Burmese royalty, amidst the booming of English guns and the imminent imperialist threat, is the first of many indicators of the transfer of power and the transition in cultural position. The unambivalent language in which the "Royal Proclamation" of the Burmese King is publicly announced is also not, without the irony of what comes soon after: "To all Royal subjects and inhabitants of the Royal empire; those Heretics, the barbarian English khalas having most harshly, made Demands calculated to bring about the impairment and destruction Of our religion the violation of our national traditions and customs The degradation of our race, are making a show and preparation as if about to wage war with our state. They have been replied to in Conformity with the usages of great nations and in words which are Just and regular." (2000: p. 15-16)

**Conclusion:-**By studying these novels of contemporary novelists from this perspective and examining them finally in a comparative framework we will be in a position to understand socio-political and cultural issues of Indian subcontinent in deeper and better way. As a matter of fact many histories are entwined in the plot. It enables the novelist to incorporate several historical changes over the three countries from the end of the 19th Century to the present. The novel begins in 1885, with Rajkumar's story. His story is not a fact, for the novelist is 'not an authority to be relied on'. The colonial history twists with personal histories to destroy and recreate new histories and cultures. The writer shifts his post colonial view to re-vision the deportation of the Burmese royal family to India. The family is transported to Madras and is disassociated from its ancestral roots forever.

The stories split between India and Burma as the narrative traces the compulsive adaptation of the royal family to the Indian family to the Indian ways in Madras and Rajkumar's gradual rising to power as a tea merchant with the help of his mentor, Saya John in Burma. The

transition from high culture to the low is perceptible in the novel. The high and low classes dissolve to create new societies. In spite of the queen's desperate attempt to maintain the aristocratic superiority, her daughters choose their partner from the common people. The first princess takes away Dolly's lover from her and they are later married. So Dolly has to sacrifice her personal happiness for the first prince in her loyalty to the royal family.

Memory and imagination play vital roles in fictionalizing the reality. Colonization and trans-cultural issues are the core of the novel which bring the global world into focus. Power works the public and private lives but the novelist goes further to tame it. Sheela Reddy quotes, "This is how power is eclipsed in a moment of vivid realism", Ghosh writes of governance and its placement by the next in an instant when the world springs of its moorings of dream and reveals itself to be girdled in the pathways of survival and self-preservation." It is chiefly through his characters that Ghosh delivers the most powerful message of the novel; the vainness of creating nation states, the absurdity of drawing lines which arbitrarily divide people when their memories remain undivided.

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