

**UNDERSTANDING GANDHI THROUGH SHASHI THAROOR'S THE  
GREAT INDIAN NOVEL – A RETELLING OF THE EPIC  
MAHABHARAT (THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL) AND FILM  
“MAINE GANDHI KO NAHIN MARA”**

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**Abstract**

In Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, Shikhandin says, “the tragedy of this country springs from you ... the pyre has already been lit for you in the flames that are burning your country” (232). Whether the accusation of Shikhandin in the text or Nathuram Godse in the reality is justified or not is problematic question to answer; and Ashis Nandy statement about Gandhi's death that “Gandhi and Godse were both possibilities within human beings, and Gandhi's death is almost a deliberate attempt to get assassinated” (Suhrod04) makes it more problematic. The movie “*Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara*” points out that every Indian citizen is the murderer of Mahatma Gandhi. The protagonist says “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is a threat to India”. This is not said in Tharoor's text but is clearly an unsaid expression in the last meeting of Kaurava Party. In this paper, I will be focusing on how the presence of Gandhi/Bhishmapitamah is felt more in the absence; independent India feels the absence of Gandhi constantly because in all its turmoil it is, in the words of Anthony Parel, “his philosophy of nationalism ... the intellectual glue that holds independent India together” (221). Similarly, in *Mahabharat*, Bhishma Pitamah is presently absent in the course of the text.

**Keywords:-** Indian Novel, Mahabharat, nationalism

“History, Ganpathi – 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”. (245)

The above lines from the text *The Great Indian Novel* provides us a glimpse into the attempt of the writer to transform his ideas of India into a narrative of history, a history which encapsulate the myths associated with the mythological India as well as the history of pre-independence and post-independence India. In certain terms, the use of myth of Mahabharat to narrate Indian

political history makes that history unconsciously a myth. The independence struggle appears as an impossible task taken by some prominent figures that were born at that period of time by chance and in the contemporary world those actions seem almost herculean to perform. According to Kanishka Chowdhary, in her essay “Revisioning History: Shashi Tharoor’s Great Indian Novel”, this is the traditional way of looking at the history which makes ““great men” myth of history” and by doing that Tharoor “erases the politics of people” (44). A post-colonial critic will raise the question that whether Tharoor writes back to the Empire or he is a constituent of that empire legacy. In the words of Chowdhary, “Tharoor’s revisionist history” is “a history from a privileged vantage point, thus ultimately remains “traditional,” for he fails to recover the history of silenced voices, the voices which made the national struggle possible” (44). Some scholars might also raise the question whether this negligence of “silenced voices” is the problem of the writers belonging to Stephanian School of English who are criticized for their elitism.

The paper will not direct itself to address this question or unravel it, because a single answer is not available. The best answer is given by the text, where VV says, “This is my story of the India I know, with its biases, selections, omissions, distortions, all mine ... Every Indian must for ever carry with him, in his head and heart, his own history of India” (373). This argument of Tharoor can be read as his justification for choosing *Mahabharat* to write about contemporary India’s span of seventy to eighty years and thus fusing the characters of the epic with people of the contemporary India. The list is endless but the paper will focus on the character of Gangaji who is also Bhisma Pitamah and at the same time the reader’s identification is with Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

Ganga Datta is given the name Bhisma because of his vow of celibacy in order to allow the sons of Satyavati become kings and even not having any future claim to the throne as in the epic *Mahabharat*. The vow of Bhisma Pitamah, a selfless gesture towards the family, gives his character epical dimension as in the epic. That epical dimension is connected with the development of his character as a character of national prominence, and his contribution to the national struggle for independence is beyond measure. Nation and the family come together. Gangaji has to take care of the family as well as the nation at the same time. Family and nation becomes interchangeable categories. So, the character of Gangaji also gets identified with Mahatma Gandhi. To say, Gangaji is Gandhi, will be a problematic thing as per my understanding, as if to say that Gangaji is Bhisma Pitamah from *Mahabharat*, because there is an allegorical gap in both comparisons. In *Mahabharat* the vow of celibacy is not the only definition of his character; instead there are lots of other features which make him Bhisma Pitamah. Similarly, Gandhiji’s struggle was not similar to Gangaji. I am not talking in literal sense but allegorical. In the struggle of Gandhiji, there is a self-conscious struggle with himself and then its implementation. The struggle clearly shows how he was able to convince the masses to participate. We notice that the text misses the conscious struggle taken by Mahatma Gandhi with his own self; whether the decision to remain celibate for his entire life or the other vows. Consequently, it is noticed that the text misses the conscious struggle taken by him before becoming the leader of the masses. Instead, in the words of Kanishka Chowdhary, his action in the text results into “mass spontaneous revolution”. She says, “Tharoor presents a falsified notion of a spontaneous movement detached from a conscious leadership”. She uses Gramsci to argue that “such beliefs only perpetuate historical myths and give the “masses a ‘theoretical’ consciousness of being creators of historical and institutional values, of being founders of a state”” (44).

The question arises that are we going to reject Tharoor based on Chowdhary's criticism as well as by witnessing the allegorical gap in his portrayals. The paper will try to bring a balance between the criticisms and Tharoor's portrayals. Not rejecting the allegorical gap but the way to read this text is to treat it more as an allegorical representation of Indian history and thus, the character of Gangaji is an allegorical portrayal of Mahatma Gandhi. To read Gangaji as Gandhi is the wrong approach towards the text. Gangaji can be considered as fusion of Gandhi in the character of Bhisma Pitamah. Tharoor injects certain ideologies of Gandhian philosophies in the character of Gangaji which makes him like Gandhi. This understanding makes us understand why he chose certain specific episodes from his life and highlights them. The importance lies with those events from his life and the ideas which lead to those events. What Tharoor attempts to indicate in his work is the meaning attached to each and specific characterization. The text is not interested in simplification of its characters but it want us understand them in their complexities. The adjective is more important than the proper nouns. The word Gandhian is more important than Gandhi. The answer to the question "in Gandhi's case, it is the message and the substance that count and not appearance and mannerisms?" raised by Harish Trivedi in his essay "Literary and visual portrayals of Gandhi"(210) is yes.

So even when the parallels are drawn between the history and the actions in the text, the focus is on the actions and the ideologies behind them and not on the characters that perform those actions. That is also the reason that almost every character including Gangaji is portrayed with certain elements of irony.

Furthermore, the murder of Gangaji in the text is also an allegorical death, a death which he was awaiting because his philosophies had been dead already. His methodologies have failed to keep the peace of the nation intact. Country has gone into the civil war. His attempt to stop partition fails. His death, allegorical death, in the text is in that moment when "he slowly got up and ... hobbled out of the room. Nobody spoke; and nobody tried to stop him (223)". VV mentions "his departure ... made the rest of the meeting much easier" and "it was the first time we had ever gone against the wished wishes of Gangaji. His era was over (223)". That is also the reason the last word on his bed of arrows is "I ... have ... failed" (234). Sudhir Chandra had gone to say that "Gandhi was not assassinated on 30 January 1948. He was killed long before that (Suhrud44).

VV refuses to give one answer to the reason for the death of Gangaji. Gangaji in the text is Bhisma Pitamah who had the boon to live forever and will die only when he will wish to do that and at the same allegorically an embodiment of Mahatma Gandhi's ideologies. This simply highlights how in the post-independence India he has no place. His fasting till death will not bring peace. The lines have been drawn already and there is nothing he can do to stop that. His "lines" which "meant lives" are now part of "those days" (Tharoor 225). His way of life holds no ground in the changed political dimensions after the independence. Ashis Nandy says "somewhere we feel Gandhi was unrealistic, not suited for modern politics" (Suhrud08).

Gandhiji's philosophies fail to stop the civil war and the post-partition days became the days of massacre. His murderer goes on to blame him for the aftermath. In the text, Shikhandin says, "the tragedy of this country springs from you ... the pyre has already been lit for you in the flames that are burning your country" (232). Whether the accusation of Shikhandin in the text or Nathuram Godse in the reality is justified or not is problematic question to answer; and Ashis Nandy statement about Gandhi's death that "Gandhi and Godse were both possibilities within human beings, and Gandhi's death is almost a deliberate attempt to get assassinated" (Suhrud04) makes it more problematic; but one thing which we can understand is that in the post-

independence era, Gangaji as well as Mahatma Gandhi met an allegorical death. In the words of Rukmini Bhaya-Nayar, “the death of Gandhi rendered the country mute and pushed his conscious thought and influence into the subconscious of the nation” (Suhrud20) and also “Gandhi ... condensed to ... a set of symbols-round glasses, sticks, phrases in children’s textbooks” (Suhrud21). That is also the reason he is not remembered in the text after his death and in India; as the movie “Maine Gandhi Ko Nahin Mara” points out that every Indian citizen is the murderer of Mahatma Gandhi. The protagonist says “Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi is a threat to India”. This is not said in the text but is clearly an unsaid expression in the last meeting of Kaurava Party.

The movie shows how a man who has the ideologies same as Mahatma Gandhi goes on to see himself as someone who had gone to kill Mahatma Gandhi, justifying Nandy’s claim that human beings have both the possibilities within themselves. In his madness he goes on to believe on a childhood episode where in a game of bow & arrow he aims with the arrow on a poster which turns out to be the image of Mahatma Gandhi. Coincidentally as well as unfortunately the day coincided with the death of Mahatma Gandhi’s assassination by Nathuram Godse, 30<sup>th</sup> Jauary 1948. His father goes on to beat him and refuses to talk with his son Uttam Chowdhary for his entire life. As he goes on to believe that his son action was an evil omen which lead to the death of Mahatma Gandhi. The action of father is in contradiction to the preaching of Mahatma Gandhi. Gandhi ji would have laughed at the child and never blamed him or even Nathuram Godse for his action. This is emphasized in the last speech of Uttam Chowdhary.

The movie through Uttam Chowdhary tries to understand the death of Gandhi in allegorical sense. Uttam Chowdhary in the start of the movie appears as a person with Gandhian determination towards life who believes in the idea that if you has the courage you can win. The poem which he believes that “it’s my life, my thinking, my creed” loses its significance and that’s why he goes on to forget, and the words got replaced in the poem to make us understand how Mahatma Gandhi had lost his value in the present world. The gradual loss of his memory and the poem symbolically highlights what Vidyut Joshi says about Gandhi’s death that “this country has been systematically killing Gandhi” (Suhrud45). His forgetfulness and remembrance of Mahatma Gandhi emphasizes in this contemporary world there is nothing valuable left to remember and that’s why even in the end of the movie he is not able to remember the lines of poem. The meanings of those lines are lost. Mahatma Gandhi “live no longer in the heart of people”. He is “everywhere else ... except in the hearts of men”. That is the reason that anyone who goes on to believe in his ideologies is either a threat to India or a mad person who need to be confined in an asylum. D L Sheth has gone to say that “it still seems to me that Gandhi, even today, in certain contexts, is seen as a living threat. And that is why you have several ongoing rituals of his assassination even today, because these rituals are important if threat is alive” (Suhrud55). That is the reason prefixing ‘Mahatma’ and suffixing ‘Ji’ to Gandhi is, as Ashis Nandy says, “the Indian way of distancing a person by giving him so much reverence that you almost always feel that he is not a part of your life, but somebody to be put on the shelf in the form of a photograph or a sculpture” (Suhrud3).

In my conclusion, I would like to agree with Harish Trivedi’s understanding that “in both literature and the visual media, it is precisely when he seems absent that he is the most powerfully present” (214). In both *The Great Indian Novel* and the movie “Maine Gandhi ko Nahin Mara”, the presence of Gandhi is felt more in the absence; independent India feels the absence of Gandhi constantly because in all its turmoil it is, in the words of Anthony Parel, “his philosophy of nationalism ... the intellectual glue that holds independent India together” (221).

This is something which is manifested very well in both the text and the movie; we look out for Gandhi to reappear to provide us with solution to the problems of the nation.

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