

## RE-INVENTING TRADITION AND DECOLONIZATION: A STUDY OF SHASHITHAROOR'S *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL*

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### Abstract

Tradition consists of several ancient codes by which Man is supposed to live in a society. Epics, dances, rituals and socio-cultural arena come into the range of this phenomenon. Therefore, antiquity is not completely dead but can be realized as a hidden diagram of people's socio-psychology, and has lost its democratic and liberal standards of living owing to hypocritical politics of political parties that is obviously based on certain temptations of vote-banks from certain communities in the present time. This does not mean that grand narratives and epics are at fault because they have been misrepresented to propagate certain political ideologies. Every age has its own problems and issues, and literature always attempts to readjust values for betterment. Therefore, the whole play of de-modernization and re-modernization is always in a process of creating new things. Shashi Tharoor's novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) has a unique potential to reinvent mythology and tradition for the welfare of society. Additionally, he attempts to fictionalize the Mahabharata mixing it with the freedom struggle of India before 1947. Furthermore, his treatment of traditionalism is so liberal that it can be viewed as a tool to decolonize people from the rigidity of human mind that has created gaps between Man and Man communalizing socio-psychology of India in the present. No doubt, grand-narratives have provided unity for certain communities perpetuating a belief system of a hegemonic cultural heritage; but now things have changed completely due to Information Technology and globalization. Therefore, there is a need to develop a global culture where men can have liberal attitudes towards differences of various communities. It does not mean to dismantle tradition and antiquity. On the other hand, there is a need to be born again humanly at socio-psychological levels on Earth through reinventing tradition.

**Keywords:** Globalization, decolonization, grand-narratives, colonialism, tradition.

Living in the world is a wonderful experience for each man who sees things differently. As there are various ambiguous things in social practices, and nobody can understand them as he intends to understand them by fancy and imagination, as everything is imposed on individuals to operate them for certain purposes. Therefore, every age appears to be talking of justice and betterment, and reinvention is always a step to create something new. Modernity, in this sense, is a viewpoint to see things differently, and Man has always been modern to invent new things. That age, which is now invalid, has probably been much valid in its time. Obviously, situations demand something more meaningful to modify social system. Man, in other words, has to enter into a system of living that can never be his own in that sense in which he comes into this world. From the very beginning of one's birth, social conditioning starts and it never ends but Man ends. Hence, Man has not been doing anything significant that can sustain humanities on Earth. All things are probably corrupt and Man claims to be civilized and advanced, but truth is opposite to it. Man is not a problem primarily as there is a huge system working behind to make him what he is not. The starting point is the elementary pattern of learning that is too much mechanical in Indian society. This, in other words, is a conditioned way of living, and unconditioning appears to be futile when there are so much conditions. Hence, Man has got confused completely in a web where he cannot think beyond boundaries of such a huge system. Indeed, Man has created an imbalanced way of living and learning that can be called as political rather than civilized one. Shashi Tharoor attempts to explore a picture of real India with its glorious past and stigmatized present. His vision of glorious past is not based upon stabilized ideologies of political parties. Therefore, he has a critical approach towards traditionalism in order to make it more relevant with respect to modern society where there is an essential need to generate values amongst communities. Dean C. Hammer in his paper "Meaning & Tradition" rightly remarks, "What gives tradition continuity, suggests Oakesott, is not its existence as a monolithic structure acting upon the subject in history, but a pattern in activity itself" (551).

India has been a mysterious country from the very beginning having many serious problems and issues. Scholars have interpreted its socio-cultural dimensions variously. Sometimes it appears to be much advanced and sometimes it has been associated with certain political idioms of critical thinkers. Additionally, Western scholars have always been interested to know real India and can never be able to realize its real essence. Most of them praise it very much from the core of their heart, but others define it in negative terms, but this country having a huge cultural historicity is so much ambiguous that no one can claim to understand it fully by selective material of its indigenous sources. E.M. Forster appropriately depicts this ambiguity in his novel *A Passage to India (1924)*. Even now, people talk about decolonization in India by taking some support from Western thinkers. If one sees from a distance, then one will get a new image of India by applying critical knowledge of the West over the East. In other words, it can be an addition to Indian socio-cultural consciousness rather than to eliminate its holistic cosmos which has never been explored completely. This does not mean that mysticism of India is rigid; for India is so flexible that it can adapt everything that appears to be unfit for it and nothing can affect its basic roots that remain far away from capturing power of scholars. Even voices of reformation start realizing their hollowness with reference to Indian society. Tharoor looks at power of Indian diversity at the center of this reinvention of tradition where the country becomes more and more complex to understand and a suitable ground to revolt against any political and cultural hegemony. Hence, real India does not support any kind of rigidity and fundamentalism. Moreover, its tradition has been based on a valid philosophical theory that believes in betterment and improvement of society. It does stop growth of tradition with changing nature of time and

social system. Hence, Rajendra Prasad in his paper “Tradition, Progress and Contemporary Indian Philosophy” clearly writes, “Therefore, the importance of the past is much greater in philosophy than in science. It is not at all safe to say of any philosophical theory, propounded even in remotest past, that it has been completely negated by some succeeding theory or theories” (251).

Colonialism has been a contentious issue among erstwhile colonies; as they have experienced domination of imperialists. Subsequently, it has become a discourse of writing back to powerful countries of the world including America, England and France etc. Now, one can analyze rigidity of colonial outlook with respect to one’s classical canon of certain scriptures and classics. All this leads people to communal violence rather than providing a token of love and brotherhood that is major motto of such books. Twentieth century has emphatically interrogated grand ideas of popular culture which have been in fashion in earlier centuries. Moreover, different communities have been trying to establish them as a means of their fundamental consciousness; but now everything is a matter of criticism in the trend of cultural studies. Hence, changes are everywhere with a profound criticism of hegemonic discourses of history and tradition; yet Man is unable to establish stability in society. On the other hand, communities are being trapped into neo-colonialism. Moreover, text comes into markets; and then it is no more there. Is it the same significant text that has been named as literature? Additionally, societies and domestic lives are completely broken and imbalanced in the very beginning of 21<sup>st</sup> century. It appears that literature is dead and has lost its true relevance; because a writer writes on demand rather than from his experience. The whole project of literariness has entered into a web of commercialization in which money is more important than values of love, brotherhood and sacrifice etc. The point is that an intellectual exercise upon the turmoil and displacement has nothing to do with re-construction and re-establishment of values where Man can get a humane status with progressing vision of materialism. Hence, Man is still colonized within politics of freedom which deals with strategies of marketization and globalization where humanity is aloof from its real values. This decline can be viewed as an era of cultural illiteracy. Therefore, there is a need to re-invent classical epics and tradition in which Man can get enough sources to modernize traditional hierarchical discourses which have created gulfs and gaps into society. Though grand narratives have been criticized in the twentieth century; yet they should not be neglected absolutely, as they are capable to light the lives of human beings on Earth rather than displacing them from human values. This does not mean to use such grand narratives for power politics and inhumane discourses. On the contrary, those should be re-invented for the welfare of society; for theological discourses have a spirit of humanism. Tharoor’s *The Great Indian Novel* (1989) can be interpreted in terms of above discussion. Hence, the present paper is an attempt to strike against colonial structures in Indian society.

Tharoor knows that colonialism does not end with political independence of erstwhile colonies; for peoples of subjugated countries are trapped into a dichotomous situation where they are socio-culturally uprooted from their indigenous values which have been essential parts of their identity and potential across the whole world; but native peoples have forgotten about their humanitarian ways of living in society under the strategies of colonialism. The novelist justifies above statement with reference to his novel *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). The major focus of Tharoor is upon decline of Indian society that has been unable to revive its values with the passage of time. Additionally, people, living by colonial legacy, have lost their inbuilt capacity of inventing something their own. Hence, independence should not be considered as independence in real sense, because the country is far away from its authentic form of production

and invention. Tharoor obviously writes in the very opening of the novel, “They tell me India is an underdeveloped country....I tell them that, in fact, everything in India is over-developed, particularly the social structure, the bureaucracy, the political process, the financial system, the university network and, for that matter, women” (1). Hence, the novelist attempts to reclaim that liberal cultural legacy which has been lost or transformed during the period of colonization in India. He is inspired by mythological story of the *Mahabharata*, and tells it with respect to freedom struggle of India before 1947. He presents the whole format in a fictionalized manner where it encounters with the British Raj and its hegemonic discourses. The theme of such encounter is not new in Indian writings in English; yet Tharoor appears to be more relevant re-inventing the epical story of the *Mahabharata* that has been a profound base of Hinduism in India. The constructed base has been utilized as a means of politics by certain political parties in the country associating it with conditioning mentality of people. Hence, it has become an emblem of fundamentalism amongst Indian people who profoundly believe in politicized form of Hinduism without knowing real Hinduism. Radhakrishnan emphatically remakes in *The Hindu View of Life*, “Hinduism is the religion not only of the Vedas but of the Epics and the Puranas. By accepting the significance of the different intuitions of reality and the different scriptures of the people living in India...[it is] a tapestry of the most variegated tissues and almost endless diversity of hues” (20). The form of Hinduism has completely been dismantled by dirty politics of India to utilize its historicity for money and power. Therefore, communal riots, violence, murder, rape and hatred are very common incidents of Indian society in the present time. The novelist seems to have a critique of this fundamentalism which has created a wide gap into various communities of India. It does not mean that philosophy of Hinduism is at fault rather than it is a political strategy that has colonized people by utilizing certain codes of this philosophy for political purposes. Tharoor shows how great epic should be used as a literary text for the betterment of society. Though substance of the novel is inspired by the *Mahabharata*; yet it should not be taken as a text by a Hindu fundamentalist; for he presents it with literary flavor that strikes against colonial outlook of Indian society in the 21st century. In other words, he has a liberal understanding of Hinduism where it should be seen as a democratic way of living rather than a matter of politics that suppresses voices of certain communities. He emphatically writes, “So we Indians are open about our differences; we do not resort to the identity-disguising tricks of standardized names or uniform costumes or even of a common national language. We are all different...” (134). On the contrary, contrapuntal reading of classical epics has misrepresented glorious past of India during the British Raj; and ideals of brotherhood, equality, liberty, truth and sacrifice have started falling apart. The country has crossed that threshold of democratic tradition owing to colonial structures which have divided communities into separate ideological frames. He emphatically remarks:

The strategy was amoral, the tactics immoral. The obvious cleavage to strike upon was between ‘the Hindus’ and ‘the Muslims’. It mattered little that such terms themselves (concealing as they did so many complex divisions and identities) made little sense, nor that they covered groups which had never, in all of India’s political history, functioned as monoliths. It mattered little, because Indians proved only too willing to echo Britain’s political illiteracy and agree to be defined in terms imposed upon them by their conquerors. (135)

Hence, Indian legacy is replaced by colonial strategies of the British who deliberately had tried to re-write Indian tradition and history for the sake of their perpetuation over this territory.

Tharoor's representation of Indian epic in following manner is not only a counter point towards colonial structures; but he also attempts to show importance of native heritage in a fresh form that can be a means of regaining lost capacities of living at their own terms. Radhakrishnan clearly points out in *The Hindu View of Life*, "It is essential to every religion that its heritage should be treated as sacred. A society which puts a halo of sanctity round its tradition gains an inestimable advantage of power and permanence"(18).

Everybody knows that India is a large democracy of the world; but that seems to be seen losing its fragrance in these days when one sees communal riots, rape and murder in the country. Even the very base of family has completely gone through tremendous changes where parents are looked as partners or business men. In other words, these changes have dismantled real values of relations in the name of freedom and individualism. Therefore, Man has gone away from ethical responsibilities. Even justice is defined with reference to commercial reality that supports matter as an ultimate truth of the world. On the other hand, Man has completely neglected emotions and believes that have been a guiding base of humanities. Moreover, the idea of materialistic justice has been failure to re-adjust society in an ideal form. Therefore, there is a need to re-invent classics and tradition to make justice more refined and humanitarian. It does not mean to reject modern idea of progress; but it is also essential to update tradition to propagate values in society. Tharoor clearly desires not to follow tradition for the sake of tradition only; but one should try to re-invent it to cope with the present rather than destroying it completely. Primarily, one should attempt to live by one's own terms with a humanitarian outlook. Secondly, one can think of others with the same way but without forgetting about one's own culture that is backbone of society. Tharoor obviously asserts, "Accept doubt and diversity. Let each man live by his own code of conduct, so long as he has one. Derive your standards from the world around you...Reject equally the sterility of ideologies...Admit that there is more than one Truth, more than one Right, more than one dharma..."(418). Hence, contradiction firstly does lie in mythology, tradition and classics but in conditioned mentality that is made to sustain cultural hegemony for centuries. Indeed, epics and scriptures do not belong to any particular community. Therefore, they should be seen as a legacy of humanity in the world where they can generate human values with respect to contemporary society.

### Workcited

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