

An Intensive Study on the Portrayal of a Prominent Allegorical Figure in Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*

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Abstract: The contemporary Indian writing in English allows a significant space for the elements of History and Myth in all kinds of literary works. In particular, many fiction writers attempt to recreate important historical events and to retell the mythological stories in their unique style. The two great Indian epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are presented in different versions and myriad perspectives. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is one such version of the *Mahabharata* which reflected the face of postcolonial India with all its harsh realities. Tharoor, who is often acclaimed for his language skills, has retold the epic through his novel by coating the historical figures and events with interesting fictional components. Though the novel has been filled with allusions and other literary devices, he created an interesting allegorical figure through the character of Draupadi Mokras. The paper attempts to explore the narrative strategies used in the depiction of the character as the major allegorical figure and how far those features assist in highlighting the theme of the novel.

Key Words : Allegory, the Mahabharata, Democracy, History, Politics.

1. INTRODUCTION:

“Death is imposed only on creatures, not their creations, and has therefore always appeared in art in a broken form : as allegory.”

-Theodor W. Adorno

In literature, an allegory is a symbolic narrative where the events, characters or settings denote abstract ideas or moral qualities. It is usually packed with both a literal and a symbolic meaning that enables the readers to dive deep into the meaning of the context to reveal, often, the moral or political truths. Allegory is different from a metaphor but mostly it is considered as an extended version of a metaphor which continues throughout a narrative. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* recreated the Indian political history before and after independence through the plot of the epic the *Mahabharata*. The characters in the novel are mostly allusional in nature as they represent the historical figures and the epic personae. However, the character of Draupadi has been designed exclusively by the author as she symbolizes the essence of Indian government setup, Democracy.

2. DRAUPADI – THE COLOSSAL FIGURE:

The epic female characters in the world of the *Mahabharata* are the evergreen epitomes of resilience and prudence. Among them, Draupadi has been often depicted as an icon of female power and the prime reason for the Kurukshetra war. Being the wife of the five mighty Pandava brothers, she equally exhibits heroic attributes throughout the epic. Similarly, in the novel Tharoor retained the exceptional traits of Draupadi while transforming her into an

allegorical image by matching her qualities with the features of Indian Democracy. The name, Draupadi Mokraasi itself is a twisted form of the word democracy and therefore sounds almost similar.

The novel consists of 18 chapters and Draupadi was introduced later in the twelfth book, as democracy is the product of postcolonial government setup in India. In the novel, Draupadi was the daughter of Dhritarashtra and Georgina Drewpad, who are the allusions to the historical figures, Jawaharlal Nehru and Georgina Mountbatten respectively. The birth of Draupadi has been depicted as: “At last, on 26 January 1950, as the Constitution of the new Republic of India was solemnly promulgated by its founding fathers, Georgina Drewpad, her face awash with tears, delivered herself of a squalling, premature baby.” (341) The birth of Draupadi on the Republic Day of India signifies that Indian Constitutional laws are based on the principles of democratic form of government. By tagging the baby as squalling and premature, the author indicates the criticism on the structure of democracy as being not so well framed for Indian reality, but it has been proclaimed loudly by the rulers of that time as the perfect form of governance.

The author then continued with his description of Draupadi’s appearance and the reason behind her adoption, in spite of being born to the parents of high social status.

The infant girl, bearing the indeterminate pink-and-brown colouring of her mixed parentage, a tiny frail creature with strong lungs, used frequently and well was immediately handed over to the faithful low-caste servant who had served Dhritarashtra and his companion throughout this difficult period. She was to be adopted, neither of her natural parents could openly acknowledge the intimacy that had produced her. (342)

The mixed parentage explains the truth behind the formation of democracy as Indian constitution took shape with the guidance of British authorities who continued to propagate their western ideologies in India even after the independence. Also, through the description of the child being frail with strong lungs suggests that during its inception, the democratic components appeared to be unstable but the foundation has been strong and long lasting. In spite of the inconsistency in the successful adoption of democracy, the nation over the years is labelled as the world’s largest democracy.

With the development of the plot, the narration tracks the growth of Draupadi at different stages of her life, which in turn, symbolizes the changes in the structure of Indian government and politics. The young age Draupadi has been described by one of her teachers, Professor Jennings as: “...she added an open manner, an ability to learn from and adapt the conditions in which she found herself, and a willingness to play with all the children in the neighbourhood, irrespective of caste, creed or culture.” (369) Initially, the administrators and the people of India found it difficult to cope with the new form of government, but later the democracy gradually sheds its true colour to fit into the structure of Indian politics. Social equality is the primary concern of the democracy and in this regard, Draupadi’s friendship with all the sectors of children signifies this aspect of democracy during its primitive stages of development.

When Draupadi reached her adult age, she has been portrayed as an attractive and beautiful girl looking more Indian as her appearance inherited her father’s features more than her exotic mother’s. Her beauty was picturized as:

Draupadi was like the flame of a brass lamp in a sacred temple of the people. Imagine it: a flame nourished by a ceaseless stream of sanctified oil and the energy of a million voices raised in chanting adoration. A flame at an evening *aarti*, at the end of the puja, a flame offered to the worshippers as bells tinkle and incense smoke swirls, and a hundred hands reach out to receive its warm benediction; A flame curling and moving towards these hands, glowing ever more brightly as it breathes their reverence. (442)

Tharoor appreciated the beauty of Draupadi with a sense of divinity. The divine setting presented in the comparison indirectly stresses on the value of true democracy. Allegorically, the flame refers to democracy and the struggles of true leaders to break the bars of British colonialism to emerges as a democratic nation has been projected here. Those historically significant crusaders of freedom are like the sanctified oil that ignites the democratic lamp. And it is also indicated that the real success of democracy lies in the people’s respect towards the nation’s policies and principles.

When it was time for Draupadi to get married, the hunt for the perfect groom started and the swayamvara scene of the epic was recreated in a way that emphasized the allegorical nature of the character. The contest to marry Draupadi was that the suitors have to drop a folded slip of paper into a wooden box and she would get inside the box filled with the ballot-papers. Then the man who is capable of opening the box and let her outside will marry Draupadi. The contest described here resembles the process of election, the very essence of democracy, in which people are given the right to select their leaders to govern them. In the novel, Arjun, the character alluded to the people’s voice or the media that makes the common people’s voice audible, opened the box and won the contest. The victory of Arjun resounded the

most popular definition of democracy given by Abraham Lincoln as “a government of the people, by the people, for the people,” Similarly the other four Pandavas Yudhishtir, Bhima, Nakul and Sahadev as the characters of the novel represents Judicial system, army, Indian Civil Service and Indian Foreign Service respectively. Draupadi’s marriage with the Pandavas asserted the significance of the five pillars of democracy.

In the sixteenth chapter of the novel the tension increases in the plot as the narration focused on the political chaos in India. The Kaurava party presented in the novel marks an allusion to the Indian National Congress party of independent India and its leader Priya Duryodhani alludes to the historical figure, Indira Gandhi. The rift between Priya Duryodhani and Yudhishtir and the political upheaval that follows are the crucial events in the political history. The narration regarding the split in the Kaurava party and Priya Duryodhani’s despotic rule coincided with the parallel narration of Draupadi’s illness. In order to make the readers focus on the condition of Draupadi along with the main plot, the author employs the foregrounding technique, a stylistic technique used to gain attraction to specific components of a text. “*And Draupadi Mokrasi still beautiful, began to appear plump, her instinctive smile creasing the flesh of her face in the slightest suggestion of a double chin...*” (491). The double chin of Draupadi denotes the rift in the political party, which in the historical perspective marked the onset of disturbance to the democratic rule.

When the clash intensifies due to Priya Duryodhani’s disrespect towards Yudhishtir, which indirectly refers to her improper handling of Indian judicial system, Draupadi’s health deteriorates and it has been described as: “*And Draupadi Mokrasi, running a fever, took to bed, complaining of alternating hot flushes and chills...*” (494) Her bad health symbolizes the mishandling of democracy by the political leaders. The issues followed one after another during the rule of Indira Gandhi and one of her decisions that provoked confusion all over India is the problem of bank nationalization. The series of chaos that followed has been represented as: “*And Draupadi Mokrasi felt her head swim as one spell of dizziness succeeded another...*” (500). As a result of the restlessness in the nation and Priya Duryodhani’s authoritative decisions inside the party, finally divided the party into two sections. Simultaneously, Draupadi was diagnosed with asthma and she find difficulty in breathing. The asthmatic condition of Draupadi stands for the democracy’s struggle to survive under the rule of Indira Gandhi who framed policies against the democratic principles.

The dice game episode of the epic is the most significant part which triggered the Kurukshetra war. In the novel, the author recreated the scene as a dream of the narrator, Ved Vyas. This scene indirectly refers to the darkest chapter in the Indian democratic history of The Emergency Period proclaimed by Indira Gandhi in 1975. Yudhishtir after losing everything in the game of dice, he announced, “My wife Draupadi, most desirable of all women, in the full flower of her youth, pride of our nation and mother of our fondest hopes-I stake her.” (547) Yudhishtir’s decision signified the alarming situation that threatened the democracy of India. The disrobing of Draupadi epitomises the suspension of people’s liberties and refusal of freedom to media during the emergency period which distraught the substance of democracy. The entry of Krishna restored Draupadi’s chastity and his voice echoed the restoration of democracy. “However hard you try, Priya Duryodhani”, he said in a calm, deep voice, ‘you and your men will never succeed in stripping Draupadi Mokrasi completely. In our country, she will always have enough to maintain her self-respect.” (553)

Later, when the party led by Yudhishtir won the election against Priya Duryodhani immediately after the election followed by the end of the emergency period. The scenario replicated the pages of Indian history in which Indira Gnadhi was defeated by the opposition group, Janata Party and Morarji Desai became the Prime Minister. At this stage the rejuvenation of democracy asserted by the people’s right to vote has been portrayed through Draupadi retaining her beauty as: “I saw Draupadi’s face glowing in the open, the flame of her radiance burning more brightly than ever.” (566) In the last chapter of the novel, it has been depicted that Draupadi cannot reach the top of the mountain, the final journey she had undertaken along with her husbands. The reason for her inefficiency to reach the destination has been given as: “She can only be sustained by the strength of her husbands. Their weakness is her fatal flaw. She cannot endure to the mountain-top.” (600) Thus, the novel affirms the fact that democracy can survive only with the support of the five pillars of Indian constitution.

3. CONCLUSION:

Tharoor designed the character of Draupadi as an allegory to outline the role of democracy in shaping the history of India. In addition, the character not only served as an allegorical figure but also enhanced the unique narrative techniques employed by the author in his attempt to recreate the history. Apart from withholding the historical and epic shades, Draupadi’s characterization can also be seen through the feministic perspectives. By depicting democracy as a female figure, the author reassured the perennial power of women and their ability to sustain all the odds.

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