

MAHATMA GANDHI AND THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

Dr. S.D. Sargar,

Head, P.G. Dept. of English,
Mahatma Phule College, Panvel (India)

*'The Great Indian Novel' by ShashiTharoor is one of the most acclaimed novels in Indian writing in English in recent years. In this novel, the novelist has tried to retell the story of the **Mahabharata**, the longest of all epics in any language, in the context of socio-political conditions of pre and post-independence period in Indian history. While doing so, he has chosen some of the characters and incidents both from the **Mahabharata** and Indian history and dexterously embedded them to fulfill his purpose of representing and interpreting the socio-political events roughly between the second and eighth decades of 20th century India.*

*Taking into consideration the unparalleled interest in and the reverence for the **Mahabharata** and its personalities in the minds and hearts of millions of Hindus all over the world and almost similar attitude towards the leaders who relentlessly fought the freedom struggle against the British and then worked for building the country into one of the most powerful democracies of the world, it would be interesting to study the events and the characters from the **Mahabharata** and Indian history and compare them with each other in order to locate the similarities and differences between the two on the one hand and their representation in ShashiTharoor's 'The Great Indian Novel' on the other. In fact, such a study, the researcher believes, would be helpful to underline the real merits and demerits of these great personalities first as the human beings and then as the great leaders and statesmen. However, as the canvass of this paper is very limited, the researcher has confined himself only to the characters of Bhishma from **Mahabharata** and Mahatma Gandhi from the Indian history. After studying these great personalities, an attempt is made to compare them first with each other and then with their representative, namely Gangaji in 'The Great Indian Novel'.*

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According to the *Mahabharata*, Bhishma was the eighth son of Shantanu and Ganga. Actually, he was the incarnation of the mighty Prabhava, one of the Ashtavasus, who was cursed by Vasishtha to endure a longer life on the earth for his crime of stealing the cow, Nandini from Vasishtha's *sashrama*. During his stay with his mother, Devavrata alias Bhishma mastered various disciplines like politics, Vedas and archery.

Bhishma is better known for his oath of life-long celibacy and of service to the King whoever sat on the throne of Hastinapur. He took this terrible oath in order to enable his father to marry Satyawati, as her father had refused to give his daughter's hand in marriage to Shantanu, Bhishma's father and the King of Hastinapur, because his grandson would never become the

King of Hastinapur as Bhishma was the eldest son of Shantanu. Pleased by the sacrifice of his son, Shantanu granted him the boon of SwechhaMrityu.

As per his vow to serve the ruling King, Bhishma remained faithful and devoted towards the throne of Hastinapur. When he won Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, the princesses of Kashifrom their Swayamvara in order to get them married to Vichitravirya, his half-brother and the King of Hastinapur, Amba vowed to avenge Bhishma as she felt humiliated because he refused to marry her. This same Amba later on came on the Kurukshetra and played an instrumental role in Bhishma's death. He was a grand human being, endowed with inimitable qualities of heart and mind. His personality has been the symbol of truth, dedication, sacrifice, dutifulness and modesty. He remained the same throughout his life, which earned him a lot of respect from both his friends and foes.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi was born on October 2, 1869 in Porbandar to KaramchandandPutlibai. He was married to Kasturba at the early age of 13. As his parents wanted him to be a barrister, Mohandas went to London in 1888 and studied law at University College, London. After coming back to India in 1891, he practiced law for some time first in Bombay and then in Rajkot before leaving for South Africa in 1893. His stay of more than twenty years in South Africa had a lasting effect on his later life as there he closely observed social discrimination against the Indians. On many occasions, he himself suffered the pangs of this inhuman treatment. Once, even though he had the first-class ticket, he was thrown off the train as Indians were not allowed to travel in First Class compartment. Similar humiliating situations all over South Africa transformed his whole outlook towards life. The prejudiced attitude of the South African Whites made him think seriously about the socio-political status of Indians living in the country. The horrendous injustice and violence to which Indians were subjected shaped his further course of life. It was in these pressing situations that M.K. Gandhi got involved into socio-political activities in South Africa and devoted his time and energy for the cause of his people. In this struggle, he invented and effectively used his weapon of satyagraha (insistence for truth) which helped him immensely to bring positive changes in the lives of the fellow Indians.

Accompanied by this strong weapon of satyagraha, M.K. Gandhi returned to his homeland and actively participated in Indian freedom struggle. His philosophy of non-violence

and satyagrahaaptly supported by his own stringent observance of them made him a prominent political and ideological leader of India who led the country towards independence from the British rule. His gargantuan contribution to the transformation of Indian socio-politico-religious milieu brought him a title of ‘Mahatma’. However, there were few people who did not like some of his policies. They had already made five unsuccessful attempts at his life. Ultimately, Mahatma Gandhi was assassinated by NathuramGodse on January 30, 1948 by firing three bullets from a point-blank range in Delhi. The greatness of Mahatma Gandhi lies in his strong faith in the principles of truth, *satyagraha*, nonviolence, vegetarianism, and celibacy, because of which, even after his death, he has been one of the greatest sources of inspiration to all, irrespective of their gender, caste, creed or country.

The character of GangaDattain ‘*The Great Indian Novel*’ is ShashiTharoor’s superb creation. Ganga Datta is also referred as Gangaji or Mahaguru during the course of the novel. He is the “...main protagonist of the Great Indian Novel (and) is...a lethal combination of MahabhartasBhishmaPitamah and the father of our nation, Mahatma Gandhi.” Being the central figure, Mr. Tharoorhas introduced Ganga Datta in “The Twice Born Tale’, the very first book of his novel. The readers are provided all the necessary details of the circumstances of Ganga Datta’s birth and the terrible vow of chastity taken by him to get his father married to Satyawati. The novelist moves swiftly forward in his story narrating the births of Vichitravirya, his marriage with Ambika and Ambalika and the birth of their sons, Pandu and Dhritarashtra and Amba’s vow of revenge against Ganga Datta.

In the second book, Ganga Datta is shown busy in his duty towards the upbringing of the princes. Here the novelist has introduced the character of Sir Richard, the British resident at Hastinapur, who is annoyed by Ganga Datta’s increasing radicalization. Now Ganga Dattahas got deeply involved in the problems of common people. It results in his participation in the Motihari conflict followed by his consequent arrest. His sense of moral obligation towards his fellow Indians and his strong determination to fulfill this obligation is illustrated through these words: “As a law-abiding citizen...my first instinct, upon receiving an instruction from the authorities to cease my activities, would normally have been to obey. However, this instinct clashed with a higher instinct, to respect my obligation to the people of Motihari whom I am here to serve. Between obedience to the law and obedience to my conscience I can only choose the

latter. I am perfectly prepared, however, to face the consequences of my choice and to submit without protest to any punishment you may impose.”(Tharoor, 1989: P.53) And it is to the surprise of all concerned that such a firm stand taken by him helped to redress their problem.

From this time onwards, there have been hundreds of occasions on which Gangaji, with his powerful weapons of disobedience, satyagraha, non-violence and fast succeeds in his struggle against the partial British officials and brings relief to the victims of injustice. His efforts strongly supported by other leaders of the freedom movement, additionally supplemented by various socio-political events won political freedom for the country. Unfortunately, the happiness of independence could not last longer as Gangaji’s principles were considered unnecessary burden for the leaders of his own party. Though...“(he) remains India’s patriarch, the founding father...(h)is vision of a village-dominated economy was shunted aside during his lifetime as rural romanticism, and his call for a national ethos of personal austerity and nonviolence has proved antithetical to the goals of an aspiring economic and military power ...”

However, Gangaji, unhappy with the unprecedented violence and the obvious indifference of the leaders towards his opinions, decided to keep himself away from the political activities and got engaged in ‘the experiment in eliminating sexual desire by inviting Sarah-behn to sleep in his bed.’ Such kinds of experimentation spread various rumours about the wisdom of the Mahaguru. Already there were few disbelievers of his philosophy, who considered Gangaji to be responsible for all the post-partition and post-independence anarchy in the country. In fact, they were in search of a good opportunity to eliminate Gangaji from the national scene. Therefore, as soon as Shikhandin got an opportunity, he shot three bullets at Gangaji. But even on his deathbed, Gangaji is shown to be calm and quiet, without any ill-feeling towards his assassin. While describing this incident, Shashi Tharoor writes: “Gangaji was in no torment. He bore his fatal impalement calmly, as another campaigner for justice and peace had accepted the catharsis of crucifixion.”(P.233)

The comparison between the character of Gangaji and his counterparts, Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi, shows that Shashi Tharoor has certainly based his character on the all-time great character of Bhishma and the real-life portrait of Mahatma Gandhi. Bhishma, unlike both Mahatma Gandhi and Gangaji, is a believer in violence as it was essential for him to get involved in many wars, including the war of Kurukshetra, to protect the kingdom of Hastinapur from its

enemies. But his violent behaviour has its own grandeur as he exhibits it only to fulfill his more sacred duties towards the throne of Hastinapur, which in given circumstances was more becoming for the person like him.

Compared to Bhishma of the *Mahabharata*, ShashiTharoor's Bhishma is more akin to Mahatma Gandhi as he is represented having almost all the qualities of the great leader of India. Gangaji, like Mahatma Gandhi, is a strong believer in the principles of non-violence, satyagraha and celibacy. These qualities certainly make both Mahatma Gandhi and Gangaji reputable figures in their respective environment and impress the readers. So far as the differences between Mahatma Gandhi and Gangaji are concerned, it is seen that Mahatma Gandhi was more directly and intimately involved with almost all socio-political events of his time than his counterpart in '*The Great Indian Novel*'.

To conclude, it can be said that while creating the character of Gangaji, Shashi Tharoor, no doubt, has tried to combine the aspects from the personalities of Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi. However, Shashi Tharoor seems to be more influenced by the real-life personality of Mahatma Gandhi than that of the literary figure of Bhishma from the *Mahabharata*. Whatever may be the degree of influence of Mahatma Gandhi and Bhishma on the character of Gangaji, it has to be taken into consideration Shashi Tharoor is primarily a creative artist and his '*The Great Indian Novel*' is a work of creative art and it should be treated as such and not as a book of history or religion; otherwise it would lead to its gross misinterpretation thereby guiding the readers towards the dark realm of semantic chaos. The same thing about this novel is emphasized in these words: "*The Great Indian Novel* is a satirical novel by Shashi Tharoor. It is a fictional work that takes the story of the Mahabharata, the epic of Hindu mythology, and recasts and resets it in the context of the Movement and the first three decades of post-independence." Therefore, without trying much to go into the trivial details of the influences of Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi on the character of Gangaji and the resemblances and differences between them, it would be better to judge him as Gangaji alone rather than the incarnation of Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi. Of course, such a comparative study will help the readers to determine the extent of influence on Gangaji's creator of Bhishma and Mahatma Gandhi; yet it is not absolutely essential to understand him as an individual character performing faithfully the role assigned to him by his creator. And there lies the success of Shashi Tharoor as a gifted literary artist.

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