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# A Comparative Study of the Political Themes of *The Great Indian Novel* and *The Mahabharata*

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**ABSTRACT:** This work explores the intriguing parallels and character comparisons between ‘The Great Indian Novel’ by ShashiTharoor and the ancient Indian epic text, The Mahabharata. This novel is a satirical retelling of the Mahabharata, blending historical and mythological elements with contemporary political and social issues. Through a comparative analysis, this work aims at highlighting the thematic similarities, especially political and their differences, as well as the character portrayals and their significance in both works.

**KEYWORDS:** Mahabharata, Great Indian Novel, Politics, Analysis, History, Indian Culture

## I. INTRODUCTION

The Great Indian Novel is a sardonic novel written by ShashiTharoor, published in 1989 by the Viking press. It is based on the story of the Indian epic Mahabharata, recreated and adapted within the context of the Indian independence movement and the first three decades after independence. Indian historical figures were adapted and compared to mythological figures and Indian mythological stories were told as the story of Indian independence and the subsequent story until the 1970s. The Mahabharata is an long heroic tale describing the historical dynastic scuffle over the throne of the kingdom of Hastinapur between the Great Pandavas and the Kauravas. The two branches of the heirs of the King Shantanu. In his novel, Tharoor remodel the story of the growing Indian democracy as a grapple between groups and individuals minutely related by their political and personal histories.

## II. MAHABHARATA- AN OVERVIEW

Mahabharata, (Sanskrit: “Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty”) one of the two Sanskrit epic poems of ancient India (the other being the Ramayana). The Mahabharata is an important source of information on the development of Hinduism between 400 BCE and 200 CE and is regarded by Hindus as both a text about dharma (Hindu moral law) and a history (itihasa, literally “that’s what happened”). Appearing in its present form about 400 CE, the Mahabharata consists of a mass of mythological and didactic material arranged around a central heroic narrative that tells of the struggle for sovereignty between two groups of cousins, the Kauravas (sons of Dhritarashtra, the descendant of Kuru) and the Pandavas (sons of Pandu). The poem is made up of almost 100,000 couplets—about seven times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey combined—divided into 18 parvans, or sections, plus a supplement titled Harivamsha (“Genealogy of the God Hari”; i.e., of Vishnu). Although it is unlikely that any single person wrote the poem, its authorship is traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyasa, who appears in the work as the grandfather of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. The date and even the historical occurrence of the war that is the central event of the Mahabharata are much debated. The story begins when the blindness of Dhritarashtra, the elder of two princes, causes him to be passed over in favour of his brother Pandu as king on their father’s death. A curse prevents Pandu from fathering children, however, and his wife Kunti asks the gods to father children in Pandu’s name. As a result, the god Dharma fathers Yudhishtira, the Wind fathers Bhima, Indra fathers Arjuna, and the Ashvins (twins) father Nakula and Sahadeva (also twins; born to Pandu’s second wife, Madri). The enmity and jealousy that develops between the cousins forces the Pandavas to leave the kingdom when their father dies. The feud culminates in a series of great battles on the field of Kurukshetra (north of Delhi, in Haryana state). All the Kauravas are annihilated, and, on the victorious side, only the five Pandava brothers and Krishna survive. Krishna dies when a hunter, who mistakes him for a deer, shoots him in his one vulnerable spot—his foot—and the five brothers, along with Draupadi and a dog who joins them (Dharma, Yudhishtira’s father, in disguise), set out for Indra’s heaven. One by one they fall on the way, and Yudhishtira alone reaches the gate of heaven.

After further tests of his faithfulness and constancy, he is finally reunited with his brothers and Draupadi, as well as with his enemies, the Kauravas, to enjoy perpetual bliss. The central plot constitutes little more than one fifth of the total work.

### III. COMPARATIVE STUDY OF THE MAHABHARATA AND THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL

**The First Book (The twice born tale):** The first chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" focuses on the character of Gangaji, a Brahmin priest who becomes involved in political activism. Gangaji is portrayed as a complex and flawed character, who struggles with questions of duty and morality as he becomes more deeply involved in politics. This mirrors the character of Arjuna in the Mahabharata, who similarly struggles with questions of duty and morality as he prepares to fight in the war. One key difference between the Mahabharata and "The Great Indian Novel" is the way in which they portray power and authority. The Mahabharata is a traditional epic that upholds the values of kingship and hierarchy, while also critiquing the abuses of power that can arise within these structures. "The Great Indian Novel," on the other hand, is a more modern and satirical work that often portrays political leaders and institutions in a critical light.

**The Second Book (The Duel with crown):** The second chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor and the "Mahabharata" both deal with political themes, specifically the struggle for power between two sides. In the Mahabharata, this struggle is between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, while in the novel, it is between the British colonial power and the Indian freedom fighters. In both the Mahabharata and the novel, there is a sense of betrayal and deception. In the Mahabharata, the Kauravas use deceitful tactics to try and gain the upper hand, such as trying to kill the Pandavas while they are in exile. Similarly, in the novel, the British use cunning tactics to maintain their grip on power, such as manipulating Indian leaders and playing different factions against each other. Another common theme is the importance of alliances. A major difference between the two works is the role of violence. In the Mahabharata, violence is a key element of the struggle for power, with battles and warfare playing a central role. In the novel, violence is also present, but it is often more subdued, with the focus instead on political manoeuvring and negotiation.

**The Third Book (The rains came):** The third chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" is actually titled "The Rains Came." In "The Great Indian Novel," the novel explores the complex relationship between the British colonial power and the Indian people. The novel depicts the British as an oppressive force that is interested only in exploiting India's resources and people for their own benefit. The Indian people, on the other hand, are portrayed as the victims of British imperialism who seek to reclaim their land and culture from their colonizers. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, the political themes center around the struggle for power and the relationship between the rulers and the ruled. The Mahabharata depicts the Kauravas as corrupt and greedy rulers who oppress their subjects and exploit their resources. The Pandavas, in contrast, are depicted as righteous leaders who seek to overthrow the corrupt regime and establish a just and fair society. Both works also explore the theme of colonialism and imperialism. In "The Great Indian Novel," the British colonial power is portrayed as an imperialist force that seeks to dominate and exploit the Indian people. The Mahabharata, while set in a different time period and context, similarly depicts the Kauravas as imperialist rulers who seek to conquer and control other kingdoms and empires. Another common theme in both works is the role of religion and mythology in shaping politics and governance.

**The Fourth Book (Raj Quartet):** In the fourth book of the "Mahabharata," titled "VirataParva," the Pandavas are living incognito in the court of King Virata. The book explores themes of power, loyalty, and identity. The Pandavas must navigate the challenges of living as servants in the court of King Virata, while also concealing their true identities. They encounter various challenges, including an attack on the kingdom by the Kauravas, and they must use their skills and resources to protect the kingdom and maintain their cover. Similarly, in "The Great Indian Novel," the fourth chapter, titled "Raj Quartet," explores the themes of power, loyalty, and identity in the context of the Indian independence movement. The chapter depicts the struggle for Indian independence and the role of various leaders and movements in achieving it. The chapter also explores the complex relationships between the Indian people and the British, as well as the tensions between different groups of Indian people. The chapter also depicts the aftermath of independence, including the challenges of nation-building and the emergence of new power structures.

**The Fifth Book (Powers of silence):** In the fifth book of the "Mahabharata," titled "UdyogaParva," the Kauravas and Pandavas prepare for war. The book explores themes of power, diplomacy, and strategy. The Kauravas and Pandavas both seek to gain allies and resources in order to strengthen their position before the impending conflict. They engage in negotiations and diplomatic maneuvers in order to gain the upper hand. The book also explores the complex



relationships between the various characters and the tensions that arise as a result of the impending conflict. Similarly, in "The Great Indian Novel," the fifth chapter, titled "Silence," explores the themes of power, diplomacy, and strategy in the context of the Indian independence movement. The chapter depicts the struggle for Indian independence and the role of various leaders and movements in achieving it. The chapter also explores the complex relationships between the Indian people and the British, as well as the tensions between different groups of Indian people. The chapter also depicts the role of diplomacy and strategic thinking in achieving political goals.

**The Sixth Book (Forbidden fruit):** In the sixth book of the "Mahabharata," titled "BhishmaParva," the war between the Kauravas and Pandavas begins. The book explores themes of loyalty, duty, and sacrifice. The various characters must make difficult choices and sacrifices in order to uphold their principles and honor. The book also explores the consequences of actions and the impact of war on individuals and society. Similarly, in "The Great Indian Novel," the sixth chapter, titled "Forbidden Fruit," explores the aftermath of India's independence and the challenges faced by the new government. The chapter depicts the political struggles of the new government and the challenges of governing a diverse and complex country. The chapter also explores the tension between tradition and modernity and the role of religion in politics.

**The Seventh Book (The son also rises):** In the seventh book of the "Mahabharata," titled "DronaParva," the war between the Kauravas and Pandavas continues. The book explores themes of war, violence, and morality. The characters must confront the moral implications of their actions and the devastating consequences of war. The book also examines the role of violence in achieving political goals and the tension between honor and survival. Similarly, in "The Great Indian Novel," the seventh chapter, titled "The Son Also Rises," explores the theme of political succession and the challenges of leadership. The chapter depicts the political struggles that arise when a leader dies and a new leader must be chosen. The chapter also explores the tension between democracy and tradition and the role of family and dynasty in politics. Both the "Mahabharata" and "The Great Indian Novel" explore the themes of war, violence, and morality in the context of complex political situations.

**The Eighth Book (Midnight's Parents):** Midnight's Parents is a significant part of the novel "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor. It is a modern retelling of the epic Indian mythology, Mahabharata, with a focus on the political and social themes prevalent in India. The Mahabharata is a vast and complex ancient Indian epic that explores several themes, including politics, power, ethics, morality, and duty. One of the prominent political themes explored in The Eighth Book: Midnight's Parents and the Mahabharata is the struggle for power and authority. In both works, the struggle for power is intense, and various characters engage in political maneuvering to gain an advantage. In The Eighth Book, the main characters, the Nehrus and the Gandhis, are depicted as powerful political families who use their influence to maintain their hold on power. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, the Kuru clan, led by King Dhritrashtra and his sons, engages in political maneuvering to maintain their control over the kingdom of Hastinapur. Another political theme explored in both works is the concept of governance and leadership. The Eighth Book portrays the complex relationship between the rulers and the ruled, and how the actions of the former impact the latter. The book highlights the need for good governance and the consequences of poor leadership, both in terms of domestic and international politics. Similarly, the Mahabharata explores the concept of good governance and the qualities of a just and wise ruler. It emphasizes the importance of a ruler's duty to his subjects and the need for a leader to act in the best interest of the people.

**The Ninth Book (Him — Or, the Far Power-Villain):** It is another significant part of "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor. It is a modern retelling of the epic Indian mythology, Mahabharata, with a focus on the political and social themes prevalent in India. The Mahabharata is a vast and complex ancient Indian epic that explores several themes, including politics, power, ethics, morality, and duty. One of the prominent political themes explored in The Ninth Book: Him — Or, the Far Power-Villain and the Mahabharata is the concept of tyranny and its consequences. In both works, the concept of tyranny is depicted through the character of Duryodhana in the Mahabharata and Him in The Great Indian Novel. The Ninth Book highlights the complex relationships between individuals and political parties and the extent to which people are willing to betray their principles to gain power. Similarly, the Mahabharata explores the theme of loyalty and betrayal through the actions of various characters who are torn between their duty to their family and their sense of morality.

**The Tenth Book (Darkness at Dawn) :** The Mahabharata is a vast and complex ancient Indian epic that explores several themes, including politics, power, ethics, morality, and duty. One of the prominent political themes explored in The Tenth Book: Darkness at Dawn and the Mahabharata is the idea of justice and its relationship with power. In The



Great Indian Novel, the character of ChhaganBhujbal seeks justice for his community against the oppressive actions of the government. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, the Pandavas seek justice for their rightful claim to the kingdom of Hastinapur against the Kuru clan's unjust actions. Both works highlight the challenges of achieving justice when those in power hold an unfair advantage. Another political theme explored in both works is the concept of revolution and its consequences. The Tenth Book portrays the aftermath of a revolution and the challenges of establishing a new political order.

**The Eleventh Book (Renunciation — Or, the Bed of Arrows):** It is a significant part of "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor, a modern retelling of the epic Indian mythology, Mahabharata, with a focus on the political and social themes prevalent in India. The Mahabharata is a vast and complex ancient Indian epic that explores several themes, including politics, power, ethics, morality, and duty. One of the prominent political themes explored in The Eleventh Book: Renunciation — Or, the Bed of Arrows and the Mahabharata is the concept of sacrifice and its relationship with power. In The Great Indian Novel, the character of Arjun renounces his claim to the throne and takes up the path of spiritual enlightenment. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, the Pandavas renounce their claim to the throne and retire to the forest after their victory in the Kurukshetra war. Both works highlight the idea that true power lies not in the accumulation of wealth or political power, but in the ability to renounce these things for a higher purpose. Another political theme explored in both works is the concept of duty and its relationship with personal desire. In The Great Indian Novel, Arjun's decision to renounce the throne is driven by his sense of duty towards his family and society, despite his personal desire to rule.

**The Twelfth Book (The Man Who Could Not Be King):** It is a significant part of "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor, a modern retelling of the epic Indian mythology, Mahabharat with a focus on the political and social themes prevalent in India. The Mahabharata is a vast and complex ancient Indian epic that explores several themes, including politics, power, ethics, morality, and duty. One of the prominent political themes explored in The Twelfth Book: The Man Who Could Not Be King and the Mahabharata is the concept of leadership and its relationship with power. In The Great Indian Novel, the character of Karna, despite his exceptional abilities, is denied the opportunity to become king due to his lower caste status. Similarly, in the Mahabharata, Karna, despite his superior qualities, is denied the opportunity to become king due to his lower birth. Both works highlight the challenges of achieving political power and leadership when society is divided along caste lines and political power is concentrated among a few families. Another political theme explored in both works is the concept of loyalty and its relationship with power.

**The Thirteenth Book (Passages Through India):** The Thirteenth Book Passages Through India and the Mahabharata both explore political themes related to the intersection of religion, culture, and politics. In "The Great Indian Novel," the character of Bhishma, a revered figure in the Mahabharata, is portrayed as a hypocritical and manipulative leader who uses his knowledge of Hindu scripture to justify his actions and maintain his power. Tharoor critiques the intersection of religion and politics, arguing that leaders often use religious doctrine to legitimize their actions and suppress dissent. In "The Great Indian Novel," Tharoor critiques the idea that Indian society must choose between tradition and modernity, arguing that these concepts are not mutually exclusive. He portrays the character of Princes Rita as a bridge between tradition and modernity, who works to reconcile the two in her personal and political life.

**The Fourteenth Book (The Rigged Veda):** The Fourteenth Book The Rigged Veda in "The Great Indian Novel" by ShashiTharoor and the Mahabharata both explore political themes related to power, corruption, and the role of media in shaping public opinion. In "The Great Indian Novel," Tharoor critiques the role of media in Indian politics through the character of Ganapathi, a corrupt journalist who uses his power to manipulate public opinion and advance his own interests. Ganapathi is portrayed as a symbol of the corrupt media in India, which often serves the interests of those in power rather than the public. Similarly, the Mahabharata explores the role of media in shaping public opinion through the character of Sanjaya, who serves as a messenger for Dhritarashtra and provides a biased account of the war to the blind king. Sanjaya's account of the war is meant to justify Dhritarashtra's actions and maintain his grip on power, highlighting the ways in which media can be used to manipulate public opinion. Another political theme explored in both works is the corrupting influence of power. In "The Great Indian Novel," Tharoor critiques the Indian political system, arguing that it is rife with corruption and cronyism. The character of Indira Gandhi is portrayed as a corrupt and authoritarian leader who manipulates the system for her own gain. Similarly, the Mahabharata explores the corrupting influence of power through the character of Duryodhana, who becomes increasingly tyrannical and ruthless as he gains more political power.

**The Fifteenth Book (Gita Govinda):** It draws heavily from the Bhagavad Gita, which is a part of the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata, on the other hand, is a vast epic poem that tells the story of the Kurukshetra War between two

branches of a royal family, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, in ancient India. While both the Mahabharata and the fifteenth chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" deal with similar themes, such as duty, dharma, and the nature of war, they differ in their treatment of these themes. The Mahabharata is a long and complex epic that weaves together multiple storylines, characters, and themes, while the fifteenth chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" is a more focused and streamlined retelling of the Bhagavad Gita. The Mahabharata portrays the complexities of human nature and the various shades of gray that exist within each character. The characters in the Mahabharata are not purely good or evil, but rather a mix of both. The story is also filled with philosophical and moral dilemmas, as characters struggle to balance their duties and responsibilities with their personal desires and ambitions. In contrast, the fifteenth chapter of "The Great Indian Novel" simplifies some of the more complex themes of the Mahabharata and presents them in a more accessible manner. The chapter focuses mainly on the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita, which emphasizes the importance of fulfilling one's duty without being attached to the fruits of one's actions. This theme is presented through a dialogue between the characters Krishna and Arjun.

**The Sixteenth Book (The Bungle Book — Or, the Reign of Error):** It is a chapter in The Great Indian Novel that is a satirical take on the politics of the 1970s and 1980s in India. In contrast, the Mahabharata is an epic Indian mythological text that dates back to ancient times and tells the story of a great war between two groups of cousins. While both works touch on political themes, they approach the subject in different ways. The Sixteenth Book in The Great Indian Novel is a direct critique of contemporary Indian politics. It uses satire to expose the corruption and ineptitude of political leaders and institutions. The characters in the book are exaggerated versions of real-life politicians, and the plot is full of absurd situations that highlight the flaws in the political system. The book also takes a critical stance on issues like censorship and media control, which were prevalent during that time period. In contrast, the Mahabharata is an ancient epic that explores timeless themes like power, duty, and morality. While it does touch on politics, it does so in a more indirect way. The story revolves around a family feud between two groups of cousins, the Pandavas and the Kauravas. The war between the two groups is sparked by a dispute over the throne, and the story explores the consequences of the characters' actions and choices.

**The Seventeenth Book (The Drop of Honey - A Parable):** The Seventeenth Book in The Great Indian Novel and the Mahabharata are two literary works that offer unique perspectives on political themes in India. In The Great Indian Novel, The Seventeenth Book tells the story of a king who desires power and is willing to do anything to maintain it. The story serves as a commentary on the dangers of unchecked power and the corrupting influence of absolute authority. The king's actions lead to a series of disastrous consequences, and the story highlights the importance of moral principles and ethical leadership in politics. Similarly, the Mahabharata also explores political themes through the actions of its characters. The story revolves around a power struggle between two families, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and their quest for the throne. The epic explores complex moral and ethical issues, such as duty, loyalty, and sacrifice, and how they intersect with politics. The characters' actions have far-reaching consequences, and the story serves as a cautionary tale about the dangers of political ambition and the consequences of unethical behaviour.

**The Eighteenth Book (The Path to Salvation):** The Eighteenth Book in The Great Indian Novel and the Mahabharata are two literary works that offer unique perspectives on political themes in India. In The Great Indian Novel, The Eighteenth Book explores the idea of salvation and redemption in politics. The story revolves around a character who is faced with a moral dilemma and must choose between personal gain and doing the right thing. The book highlights the importance of individual responsibility and moral courage in politics and suggests that true redemption can only come through self-awareness and ethical action. Similarly, the Mahabharata also explores the theme of salvation and redemption through its characters. The epic focuses on the concept of dharma, or righteous duty, and how it intersects with politics. The characters are faced with complex moral choices, and the story suggests that true salvation can only come through selfless action and following one's duty.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

The comparative study of 'The Great Indian Novel' and 'The Mahabharata' reveals intriguing connections and stark differences, highlighting their unique contributions to Indian literature and cultural understanding. 'The Great Indian Novel' by ShashiTharoor stands as a modern retelling of the 'Mahabharata', an ancient Indian epic that explores profound philosophical and moral dilemmas. Tharoor weaves a complex narrative, blending historical events with fictional elements, while incorporating political satire and social commentary. Through this retelling, Tharoor seeks to



reflect the contemporary socio-political landscape of India, using the epic as a backdrop to comment on issues of power, corruption, and the erosion of moral values.

On the other hand, the 'Mahabharata' is a sacred Hindu scripture, deeply rooted in Indian mythology and spirituality. Composed over centuries, it encompasses a wide range of philosophical teachings, religious beliefs, and moral dilemmas. The epic delves into the intricacies of human nature, exploring concepts such as dharma (duty), karma (action and consequence), and the pursuit of righteousness. It presents a vast array of characters, each with their own flaws and virtues, illustrating the complexities of human existence.

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