

**AN INTERTEXTUAL CONTRASTSON SHASHI THAROOR'S  
THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL AND GURCHARAN DAS'S  
THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING GOOD: ON THE SUBTLE  
ART OF DHARMA**

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**ABSTRACT**

Intertextuality is a term developed by the poststructuralist Julia Kristeva in the 1960's and widely accepted by postmodern literary critics and theoretician. Her invention was a response to Ferdinand De Saussure's theory and his claim that signs to gain their meaning through the structure in a particular text. Through the concept of intertextuality a text is interpreted and reinterpreted in a different perspective. From that interpreted text, it can allocate many other ideas like portrayal of similar character, parallel story lines, and contradictions between characters, similar illustrations which influences on the society and style and techniques of both authors. Most prominently, it focuses on the paradoxical rudiments in both the works with the source text. An example of Intertextuality in literature, Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* as a retelling of the great epic *Mahabharata* in different perspectives. Das and Tharoor make an attempt to retell the great complex epic as a basic text in their own original text with splendid simplicity rather than being controversial.

**Key Words:** Intertextuality, text, Mahabharata, similarity and contrasting characters

Intertext is the shaping of a text's meaning by another text and it creates interrelationship between source text and original text says Sussle. A source text is a basis for the creation of a new text i.e. intertext. Every author embellish the different aspects and further compare and contrast one text with the other text, which brings forth the specialization of each text on its own. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* is taken from the source text *Mahabharata*. Contrasting elements from above works show writers efficiency and the unique qualities in their work. Das can be called as present day Ved Vyasa because he voluntarily learnt Sanskrit language under Sanskrit scholars Daniel Ingalls and Sheldon Pollock for a couple of years and he wrote *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* in the first person narrative technique. He used technical terms and words to give major importance to the Sanskrit language. Das picked up important characters from the epic and scrupulously described the inner conflict in each chapter in his *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*.

Tharoor does not replace history with myth, but he employs the mythical plot of the *Mahabharata* as a structuring frame. However, he alters the mythological essence of the epic by representing historical personages from Indian history with human attributes. He compares incidents and characters from the *Mahabharata* to the real life people in the contemporary world. He focuses on the Political, Social and the Historical events of both the pre and the post independence era. Tharoor's novel is brilliantly filled with the life of India and reflects the need of fundamental rights to be independent. Antithetically, Das compares and blends *Mahabharata* with humankind and the contemporary society. He focuses on the search for dharma and adharma in this complex world, not only the good and the evil in the human race but also moral

conflict. Das's work is highly technical set against the socio-political background of India and it reciprocates the need for righteousness.

Das sensibly demythologized Mahabharata in a wider angle. The mythological elements, incidents or legends are considered as no more myth but as reality. Das explicitly uses the major characters from the source text and further implements the characters in his work *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, to lead a different phase of life in reality. The transformation of the ancient myth in the contemporary world sounds more successful and authentic rather than unsuccessful.

Mahabharata was originally written in Sanskrit by Ved Vyasa, but later it was translated by C. Rajagopalachari. In his preface he states that:

It is not an exaggeration to say that the persons and incidents portrayed in the great literature of a people influence national character no less potently than the actual heroes and events enshrined in its history. It may be claimed that the former play an even more important part in the formation of ideals, which give to character its impulse of growth. (MB vii)

The ancient epic *Mahabharata* was originally written in the form of a poem. More likely, it was composed by the bardic poets of Brahmanism. In contrast, *The Great Indian Novel* is written in a more mocking tone. Allegorical, satirical verses are used to convey the story of Pandu in the path of salvation. *The Great Indian Novel* includes numerous puns and allusions to the famous works on India, such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim*, Paul Scott's *The Jewel in the Crown*, Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Autobiography of an Unknown Indian*, and E.M. Forster's *A Passage to India* to contemporary Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*. Whereas, *The Difficulty of*

*Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* is written in the form of prose, which has the real image of the society with exemplary instances which express the characters' inner conflict. The work includes a number of references from other writers' text and also from the classics.

The greatest ancient epic *Mahabharata* is the story of a futile and terrible war of annihilation between the children of the two brothers of Bharata clan. The rivalry between the Pandavas and Kauravas i.e. the five sons of Pandu and the hundred sons of his brother, Dhritarashtra. It takes place in and around Hastinapura. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor recast the story of the nascent Indian democracy as a struggle between groups and individuals closely related to their personal and political histories. Historical figures from India are transformed into characters from mythology and it retells the story of Indian Independence in the 1980's. In contrast, Das provokes an idea in connection to *Mahabharata* and contemporary society or issues, and it is about the incomplete lives and how good people act badly in chaotic circumstances. He stresses on reality 'how human beings exist in this world to search for goodness through laboriousness'.

The major characters from the great epic are the Kauravas: Duryodhana, Bhishma, Karna, Ashwatthama and Drona and the Pandavas are: Yudhishtira, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula and Sahadeva, Draupadi and Krishna. Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* inversely portrays Duryodhana as Priyaduryodhani, a young woman leader who is avenged with envy. The character is compared to the historical figure, 'Indira Gandhi'. Tharoor incorporates the two groups, namely Kauravas and Pandavas in his work. The Congress party is represented by the Kauravas and the villains are led by Duryodhani, who is an autocratic villain and a daughter of

Dhritarashtra and the head of the Kauravas party. She was popularly known as 'the only man in the society'.

In *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, the antagonist is Duryodhana, who scorched by his envy destroys the kingdom. Though, he is good at heart, he is instigated by his maternal uncle as a result of whom he tries to kill the protagonist. As Immanuel Kant, criticized the envy of Duryodhana as:

Frankly, I have not met a single person who was free of envy, although some claimed to be. Put two human beings together and there will be envy. Envy is so pervasive, so natural, that one is often not aware of it. The universal human tendency to envy forces the Mahabharata towards a devastating conclusion. (TDBG 10)

In the classical epic *Mahabharata*, the image of Bhishma is portrayed to be the most prominent character and head of the Kauravas. Similarly, in *The Great Indian Novel*, Bhishma is portrayed as Gangaji or Gangadatta and he is depicted as a historical figure bearing resemblance to the father of our nation i.e. M. K. Gandhi. Tharoor evolves a deep respect for the leader and he projects Mahatma and his work as an experiment of his life and it describes the scope of Gandhian method. On the other hand, in *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, Das implemented the moral conflict of Bhishma in the contemporary world. An Indian tendency to renounce the world is a known fact. Being selfless, human beings should not renounce and then become solitary instead; they must learn to change their attitude to live their life in this complex world. Deliberately, Das shows selfless personalities such as Dhirubhai Ambani, Mahatma Gandhi and Mother Teresa. All

these altruistic people are called Karma Yogis i.e. one who acts without being attached to the results of one's deeds.

As Draupadi in the epic *Mahabharata* is depicted as a chaste woman who was wedded to the Pandavas in the Dvaparayuga. She was humiliated in the court of Hastinapur by Duryodhana. In *The Great Indian Novel*, Tharoor observes this incident and reciprocates it with regard to the present day world. Draupadi Mokrasī had the image of both Western and the Eastern culture within her. Since she was born during the independence insists on democracy in the Indian nation.

In relation to it, Das portrays Draupadi's inner conflict with regard to the contemporary world. He brilliantly exaggerates Draupadi's courage in her search for Dharma, as she was the only woman, who questions the patriarchal society, when injustice happens to her. So this seems to be the first step taken for the quest of dharma in the world of adharma. Das's *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* is a replica of *Mahabharata* to show, how difficult it is to live in this world. As women are still submissive unable to question the injustice that is being implemented on them, courage is a paramount feature that every woman must hold on as a powerful weapon to fight like Draupadi portrayed in *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*.

Tharoor takes up two allegorical elements, which are Democracy and Dharma. Democracy is embodied by Draupadi and Dharma is represented by Yudhishtra, who is assigned to look after the Indian Judicial System. In *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma*, Das assigns pivotal role to the sense of duty consciousness to Yudhishtira who says to Draupadi that, "I act because I must. Whether it bears fruits or not, buxom Draupadi, I do my duty like any householder" (63).

Yudhishtira's capricious conscience forces him to play a game of dice against the Kauravas and to lose the Pandavas kingdom and he further sets forth in search of Dharma. Though he commits mistake he takes up the responsibility to save the Pandavas. On the other hand, Yudhishtira is remorseful due to his misdeeds towards the cruel Kauravas.

In *The Great Indian Novel*, Arjun symbolizes the print media. He is a man of contradictions, perfectly reflects both the sides of diversity and the discordance of Indian masses. In contrast, Das exemplarily shows Arjuna's despair in his attitude and his extraordinary fight on the fourteenth day at Kurukshetra which is compared to Achilles in *Iliad* and he is called as *aristeia*, a word used in Greek epics, which refers to a warrior's finest moment in the battlefield, "Both heroes are driven to action and revenge after the death of a loved one. Arjuna is roused after Abhimanyu's death; Achilles is awakened from his sulking slumber by Patroklos's killing Hector"(TDBG 106).

One of the most important episodes in *Mahabharata* is the death of Drona. Drona is a teacher of archery to the Kauravas and the Pandavas. He is the father of Ashwatthama, who is filled with rage to kill the Pandavas. Drona's death was in his hands as no human can kill him. Pandavas plan before hand and decide to kill Ashwatthama. When the news of his death reaches Drona, he succumbs to deathbed. Before he dies, he pleads Yudhishtira (Dharmaputra) to reveal the truth. Simultaneously, Bhima kills an elephant and names it Ashwatthama. So, Yudhishtira reveals the truth that Ashwatthama is dead and in an undertone names the elephant after him. After hearing the news of his son's death, he also dies in the war. Ashwatthama overhears his father's death and avenges to kill the Pandavas. In *The*

*Great Indian Novel*, Bhim catches a cockroach and kills it and names it as “Ashwatthama”.

In *Mahabharata*, Ekalavyan sacrifices his thumb, for his guru / teacher Drona. But in *The Great Indian Novel*, the myth of Ekalavya is totally changed and written in a different form, that Ekalavya refused to sacrifice his thumb and Drona mightily asks him to go. Das portrays, Drona as being partial towards low class people and crooked in his nature.

A paradoxical intervention in a text gives a contrasting idea from one text to another and by doing so the text touches on a wider angle, in its similarity and contrasting features. Contrast further leads to the understanding of the different characteristics of human beings and their conflicts. Das writes and rewrites an epic on the different perspectives which reflect the society.

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