RSIRJLE GWALIOR Research Scholar - An International Refereed Journal of Literary Explorations

Research Scholar
An International Refereed e-Journal of Literary Explorations

ISSN 2320 – 6101
www.researchscholar.co.in
Impact Factor 0.998 (IIFS)

DE/MYTHICIZING GANDHI: SHASHI THAROOR'S *THE GREAT INDIAN NOVEL*

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Abstract

Sashi Tharoor's work parodies the events of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's personal and political life. Gandhi in the history of nationalist struggle of India has held the centre stage. He, therefore, cannot avoid the outcomes of it which are both benign and malign. While most of the Indian English writings portray him as a messiah, Tharoor's portrayal is a different one due to its seriocomic but critical attitude. Through allusions to both the grand epic Mahabharata and the history of Indian struggle for Independence Tharoor critiques both Gandhi and Gandhism of his followers.

Keywords: Roman à clef, Struggle for Independence, Epic, Parody, myth, satire, Gandhism

The life of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi has been a source of literary inspiration ever since his emergence in the mainstream of Indian history. Indian English literature was not the only one field to exploit the Gandhian theme during the colonial period especially in the last three decades of the Indian nationalist struggle against the British colonial rule. Myriads of regional-vernacular literature acquired a fresh lease of life through their adoption and adaptation of the Gandhi motif. The often mythicized life of Gandhi— his doctrine of purity in body and mind; truthfulness; celibacy; vegetarian-food habit; nonviolence; simplicity in manner as well as attire; mass mesmerizing qualities; epicene traits; fasting; determination; self-reliance; caste-less attitude; perseverance; spirituality; universal appeal and acceptability; successful campaigns against the British misgovernance; love for rural India; saintly, ashramite life; etc. have frequently been dramatized in the literary traditions of India of that time. One common mood of almost all those literary endeavours, however, has been somewhat hagiographic or that of hero-worship.

Gandhi has been treated like an avatar or a messiah who is the last succor of the common Indian folks in their utmost distress under the exploitative colonial rule by the British and their native collaborators. Gandhi's mass mobilization, moral and spiritual upliftment, rural reconstruction, traditionalism-modernity discourse, etc. have been a popular theme in the so called 'Mahtma novels' and short stories like *Kanthapura* (1938) and *Comrade kirillov* (1976)

by Raja Rao; *Murugan, The Tiller* (1927); *Kandan, The Patriot: A Novel of New India in the Making* (1932); and *Jatadharan and Other Stories* (1937) by K. S. Venkataramani; *Athavar House* (1937) and *Chronicles of Kedaram* (1961) by K. Nagarjan; *So Many Hungers* (1947) by Bhabani Bhattacharya; *The Flame of the Forest* (1955) by Sudhin N. Ghosh; *Untouchables* (1935) and *The Big Heart* (1945) by Mulk Raj Anand. Some of the notable vernacular literary works that have been developed upon the Mahatma theme are Premchand's *Premashram* (1921) and *Rangabhumi* (1925) in Hindi; Ramanlal Vasantlal Desai's *Gram Lakshmi* (1940) in Gujrati; G. T. Madkholkar's *Muktatma* (1933) in Marathi; and Satinath Bhaduri's *Jagari* (1946) in Bengali (Mehrotra 169-71).

The general timeline of these works suggests that almost all of them have been written at the juncture of Gandhian nationalist struggle between 1920 and 1947 and the aftermath of Independence. Apart from this periodic nature of these works and the mood of idol-worship of Gandhi, these works have critiqued the atavistic and organic ideal of Gandhi in a very limited manner especially when those ideals came moderately into conflict with the Nehruvian model of socialism and industrial as well as urban development. But still representing Gandhi in a comic/satirical setting has been sacrilegious until R. K. Narayan's *Waiting for the Mahatma* (1955) and *The Vendor of Sweets* (1967), where the author has humorously shown the distortion of the so called Gandhian ideals at the hand of self-proclaimed Gandhians (Mehrotra 202).

The grand panorama of the theatricality and performability of Gandhi's life is, however, the centre stage of Shashi Tharoor's satirical novel called *The Great Indian Novel*. By genre this work has often been described as a Roman à clef. Online encyclopedia website like *www. wikipedia. Org* describes this genre as the following:

> ***Roman à clef*** or ***roman à clef*** (French pronunciation: [ʁɔmɑ̃n‿a kle]), French for "novel with a key" is a phrase used to describe a novel about real life, overlaid with a façade of fiction. The fictitious names in the novel represent real people, and the "key" is the relationship between the nonfiction and the fiction. This "key" may be produced separately by the author, or implied through the use of epigraphs or other literary devices.

Created by Madeleine de Scudery in the 17th century to provide a forum for her thinly veiled fiction featuring political and public figures, *roman à clef* has since been used by writers as diverse as Victor Hugo, Phillip K. Dick, and Salman Rushdie.

The reasons an author might choose the *roman à clef* format include satire; writing about controversial topics and/or reporting inside information on scandals without giving rise to charges of libel; the opportunity to turn the tale the way the author would like it to have gone; the opportunity to portray personal, autobiographical experiences without having to expose the author as the subject; avoiding self-incrimination or incrimination of others that could be used as evidence in civil, criminal, or disciplinary proceedings; and the settling of scores.

If we see the time frame of Tharoor's work, we shall find that it has been written far away from the anti-colonial, nationalistic fervour, i.e. in 1989. Secondly, he has completed a considerable part of his higher education in the West. Besides, the author had already been posted abroad in various departments and diplomatic missions of the United Nations for about eleven years when his book was published. So, we can surmise from all these facts that he has by that time grown a sense of detachment or distance from the nationalist sentiment of the original country and as a result acquired an unbiased and independent critical faculty. Thus he has been able to parody even the very greatest of the national leaders who have achieved a status of demigod among their votaries in India. In this process he skillfully fuses the historical reality of

colonial as well as post-independence India with the mythical reality of the grand epic—the *Mahabharata* at the fictional level. As a result what emerges is a socio-political satire in the form of a pastiche with varied degree of magic-realism and intertextuality.

Tharoor has created a narrative voice in his novel in the form of V.V., short name for Ved Vyas, who apart from only the name has much resemblance in character with the other Ved Vyas, the omniscient dictator of the *Mahabharata*. As Ved Vyas dictated the epic to Ganesha, V.V. does the same with the history of Indian nationalist struggle against the British colonial rule, its achievement of Independence and the development of events in the three subsequent decades. Here his dictation is painstakingly recorded by Ganapati, who, however, sometimes becomes skeptical towards the views held by his dictator. Ganapati is the postmodern, postcolonial psyche of the new Indian youths who are critical of the complacency of their previous generation about their history of the past as well as their experiences of the living present. There are allusions to innumerable mythical characters drawn from the epic and all of them have their contemporary counterparts in the history of India. Before going to details we shall look into all those references very briefly. As the novel chronicles the events even after the death of the main protagonist Ganga Datta or Gangaji who is but an incarnation of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, we shall mention in the limited scope of this paper only those characters, places and events relevant till his tragic death in the table below for the sake of convenience in discussion:

Character from the Novel	***Mahabharata* Character**	**Historical Figure**
Ved Vyas (V.V.-ji), the narrator, 88 years old and forced into retirement from politics, dictates his memoir	Vyasa, son of the wandering sage Parashar and fisherman's daughter Satyavati; author of the Vedas and the Mahabharata; father of Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Vidur; when Ambika and Ambalika were sent to him to be inseminated, his ugliness caused Ambika to close her eyes (resulting in Dhritarashtra's blindness) and made Ambalika turn pale (resulting in Pandu's physical infirmity)	C. Rajagopalachari ("Rajaji"), close associate of Gandhi and last governor-general of India, Sanjeeva Reddy, ex-Chief Minister, Andhra Pradesh, ex-speaker Lok Sabha, defeated by V.V. Giri in the presidential election in 1969, though being the official Congress candidate, last elected as President in 1977. Acharya Kriplani, who along with Jayaprakash Narayan, was instrumental in getting Morarji Desai elected unanimously as Prime Minister candidate of the Janata party in 1977. V. V. Giri, writer, orator, politician, labour activist, freedom fighter; served in many offices, including as governor of several states, president of India and labour minister.
Ganapathi, a young South Indian scribe sent by Ved Vyas's friend **Brahm** to transcribe the tale; he	Ganesh, the elephant-headed Hindu god who wrote down Vyasa's account of the *Mahabharata.* Brahm must be Brahma, the	

is described as having a "big nose and shrewd, intelligent eyes," an "elephantine treat, broad forehead," a "substantial belly" and "dragging an enormous trunk behind him"	supreme creator in Indian mythologies.	
Ganga Datta (Gangaji or the Mahaguru), a celibate spiritual leader who begins his career as the regent of Hastinapur	Bhishma (Devavrata), celibate son of Shantanu and the river Ganga; his oath of celibacy led him to reject **Amba**; regent who rules Hastinapur in the absence of a legitimate ruler in the line of Satyavati, his father's second wife	Mahatma Gandhi ("Gandhiji" or the Mahatma), spiritual leader of the independence movement, who advocated celibacy.
Lady Georgina Drewpad, wife of the viceroy and lover of Dhritarashtra		Edwina Mountbatten, wife of the viceroy, Lord Louis Mountbatten, who, it is rumoured, was a paramour of Nehru's
Dhritarashtra the blind, the son of Ved Vyas and Ambika, the elder heir to Vichitravirya	Dhritarashtra, the blind king of Hastinapur	Jawaharlal Nehru, India's first prime minister, often termed a blind idealist
Pandu the pale, the son of Ved Vyas and Ambalika, the younger heir to Vichitravirya, who is cursed with a heart condition that prevents him from enjoying sexual intercourse; he allows his two wives sexual freedom so that they may bear him sons (the five Pandavas). He dies when he finally succumbs to the charms of his second wife on an airplane.	Pandu, brother of Dhritarashtra, who suffers from a curse that says he will die if he ever engages in sexual intercourse (he eventually dies when he has sex with his second wife); his two wives take advantage of a spell through which they bear the sons of the gods (the five Pandavas)	Shubhash Chandra Bose, the independence leader who, in contrast with Gandhi, took up arms against the British and accepted help from the Axis powers in establishing the Indian National Army. He was last seen boarding an airplane that disappeared in flight.

Vidur Hastinapuri (**Vidur Dharmaputra**), the wise, the son of Ved Vyas and Ambika's maidservant	Vidura, son of Vyasa and a maid, who was sent by Ambika and Ambalika to avoid having to have intercourse with him again; prime minister to Dhritarashtra, Pandu, and Duryodhan; saved the Pandavas' lives on multiple occasions	Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who forced the accession of the princely states and established the Indian Administrative Service
Jayaprakash Drona	Drona, the instructor in the arts of warfare to the Pandavas and Kauravas	Jayaprakash Narayan, a former freedom fighter who opposed the rule of Indira Gandhi; leader of the Janata Party, which defeated Congress in the 1977 elections
Viscount Drewpad	Drupada, the Raja of Panchala, and lifelong enemy of Drona; father of Draupadi and Shikhandi	Lord Louis Mountbatten, the last viceroy of India
Ronald Heaslop, a British official who was once friends with Drona, but when Drona asks him for assistance, Heaslop insults him	Drupada, the Raja of Panchala, who was a childhood friend of Drona, but when Drona asked for his help, Drupada insulted him	A reference to a character (also a British official in the days of the Raj) from *A Passage to India* by E. M. Forster.
Gandhari the Grim	Gandhari, Dritarasthra's long suffering wife	Kamala Nehru, who endured the many sexual infidelities of her husband, Jawaharlal Nehru
Amba/Shikhandin, one of three royal sisters seized by Ganga Datta to be wives to Vichitravirya; Amba was in love with Raja Salva of Saubal and in the end was rejected by Salva, Vichitravirya, and Ganga Datta; she swore revenge on Ganga Datta and was instrumental in his eventual death	Amba/Shikhandi (Shikhandini), who was rejected as a wife by Bhishma and was reborn as a man to get revenge; eventually instrumental the death of Bhishma at Kurukshetra	Nathuram Godse, the killer of Gandhi
Ambika and Ambalika	Ambika and Ambalika, the sisters of Amba, who were	

	married to Vichitravirya. When Vichitravirya died without issue, they were sent to Ved Vyas to be impregnated; horrified by Ved Vyas's appearance, Ambika closed her eyes and Ambalika turned pale with fear; on a second occasion, Ambika sent her maidservant to Ved Vyas in her stead	
the **Kaurava Party**	the Kauravas, the villains led by Duryodhan, who usurp the Pandavas from the rulership of Hastinapur	the Congress party
Priya Duryodhani, the autocratic villain, daughter of Dhritarashtra and head of the Kaurava Party	Duryodhana, eldest of Dhritarashtra's 100 sons, leader of the Kauravas	Indira Gandhi, daughter of Nehru, and third prime minister, who, in the early 1970s, declared an "emergency" and seized dictatorial powers
Mohammad Ali Karna, son of Kunti and Hyperion Helios, the leader of the Muslim Groupo and father of Karnistan; known as *Khalifa-e-Mashriq* ("Caliph of the East")	Karna, the elder brother of the Pandavas, who becomes an associate of Duryodhan after the Pandavas reject him	Muhammad Ali Jinnah, the father of Pakistan, who began his career as a colleague of Nehru and Gandhi in the Indian National Congress; known as *Quaid-e-Azam* ("Great Leader")
the **People's Front**	the Pandavas, the heroes led by Yudhisthir	the Janata Party
Yudhishtir	Yudhishtira, eldest of the five Pandava brothers, who embodies the concept of dharma, justice, honesty, virtue; the son of Kunti and the god Yama	Morarji Desai, the honest but ineffective fourth prime minister; the Indian Judiciary
Bhim	Bhima, the second Pandava, who embodies the concept of strength; son of Kunti and the god Vayu	The Indian Army, seen as the sole incorruptible institution in Indian society
Arjun	Arjuna, the third Pandava and an expert archer, who served as supreme commander of the Pandava forces at Kurukshetra;	the Indian news media

	son of Kunti and the warrior god Indra	
Nakul and Sahadev	The two youngest Pandavas; twin sons of Madri and the Ashwins, the Light of Sunrise and the Light of Sunset	The Civil Service and the Foreign Service
Ashwathama, son of Drona, who supports Duryodhani earlier but joins opposition after getting mistreated by Duryodhani and later becomes deputy PM in Yudhistir's government	y PM in Yudhistir's government **Ashwathama**, son of Drona	Jagjivan Ram, defence minister in Indira gandhi government, joins the opposition during emergency , and later becomes deputy prime minister, at the behest of Jai Prakash Narayan, in Morarji Desai government
Ekalavya	Ekalavya	V. V. Giri, writer, orator, politician, labour activist, freedom fighter; served in many offices, including as governor of several states, president of India and labour minister. Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, the Indian President who assented to Indira Gandhi's seizure of emergency powers

There are allusions to mythological places too. They are mentioned in the following table:

Place in the Novel	**Actual Place**
the annexation of **Hastinapur**	the annexation of Oudh
Bibigarh Garden	Jallianwala Bagh in Amritsar
Karnistan ("The Hacked Off Land")	Pakistan
Great Mango March	Gandhi's Great Salt March
Chaurasta	Chauri Chaura

[Both the charts have been taken from wikipedia. org with some remodifications]

Like the *Mahabharata*, *The Great Indian Novel* also has eighteen books. Tharoor has given more focus to the older generation consisting of Ganga Datta, Dhritarashtra, Pandu, Ved Vyas, Gandhari, Kunti, Madri, Vidur, etc. than the younger one that the Pandavas and their associates like Draupadi or Krishna belong to. Up to Gangaji's (alias Gandhiji's) fateful death in the eleventh book, he is the central attraction of all actions.

In the first chapter titled "The Twice-Born Tale" the author recounts the somewhat accidental appearance of Ganga Datta in the political scene of the princely state called Hastinapur. His mystery-shrouded past life also has an allusion to that of M. K. Gandhi who

spends the first half of his life abroad in England and South Africa detached from the national politics at home. A reference to his engagement into anti-racial campaigns, "'defiance of British laws', 'arrest', 'jail' and 'expulsion'" in South Africa against the also gets its place in the novel when Ganga Datta successfully attempts to convince the British rulers about his own incompetence at being the suitable heir of his father in the princely state of Hastinapur (25). His impulsive habit of oath-taking results in the disastrous fate that ultimately changes the future course of the entire nation as well as his own life, if he has one of course. He pledges for lifelong abstinence from carnal desires as well as public offices like monarchy or ministership. This he does just to please his father who has been so much anxious to marry Satyabati and as a result earns the fatal boon of Santanu, his more than pleased father, to die only by his own will. An allusion to the solemn vow of Devavrata, Shantanu's son by his former wife Ganga, that earned him also the title "Vishma" cannot be overlooked in this context. Since then one of the supreme aims of his life has been to interfere in other peoples' private life, especially into their marriage and parentage and that he often does by publicizing/politicizing the personal and personalizing the public/political. Thus he abducts three ladies— Amba, Ambika and Ambalika, from a royal court simply to marry them with Vichitravirya, his half-brother. As a result Ambalika, the fiancé of Raja Salva of Saubal, holds Ganga Datta responsible for her disgraceful life and vows to revenge for it, which she does by changing her sex and assassinating Gangaji at the eleventh book titled "Renunciation—or the Bed of Arrows" (219-235). There is an effective allusion to the epical episode of the Mahabharata, where the hermaphrodite, Shikhandi took revenge on Bhishma for her humiliation (230-234). In the historical context, it alludes to the assassination of Gandhi in the hand of Nathuram Godse.

Before going to the culmination of Gangaji's fate we shall see other mythical allusions of the novel concerning Gangaji's fictional life as well as Gandhiji's historical life. Gangaji is a storehouse of traditional, ancient knowledge. He has a ready solution with scriptural sanction for each and every problem of one's life however mundane or exotic it is. So, he arranges for the insemination of Ambika and Ambalika, the wives of the impotent king, Vichitravirya, by Ved Vyas through his gentle persuasion of everyone concerned (30-32). As a result, Dhritarashtra, the blind; Pandu, the Pale; and Vidur, the wise are born.

Gangaji's Motihari campaign to mitigate the plights of indigo farmers has allegorical reference to Gandhiji's phenomenal campaighns at Champaran and Kheda, that earned him unquestionably universal leadership in the nationalist struggle for independence. Gangaji's successful defence of his action at the colonial court convinces the common folk of India about his holiness or mystical power (49-55). Due to annexation of the state of Hastinapur as a retaliatory gesture by the British angered by Ganga Datta's interference, the entire royal family joins politics and the Kaurava Party gets fresh lease of life. In the meantime Gangaji becomes leaner in body and sterner in spirituality; eclectic, philosophical studies consisting of Vedas, Manu, Tolstoy, Ruskin, etc. and vegetarianism—the similarity with historical M. K. Gandhi and his association with the Indian National Congress which was till then a moribund organization only to be revived by Gandhi's active participation are manifested here beyond any doubt (25-26).

Gangaji's paternalism as well as a queer sense of justice again is responsible for the arrangement of marriages and consequent conjugal bliss of Dhritarashtra, Pandu and Vidur. His philosophy of utilitarianism even in the context of marriage is noteworthy in his choice of brides for the royal house of Hastinapur; for example, he chose Gandhari for blind Dhritarashtra as she is prophesied with the birth of a hundred sons, hence a hundred prospective freedom fighters of

Hastinapur, because"…she hails from a most productive line" (43). Similarly Kunti's exquisite beauty and fame in spite of being somewhat scandalous makes her the bride of Pandu, privileging him, however, to earn another bride in the form of Madri, just for the sake of compensation, of course. Vidur also gets his wife only because she is well educated and fluent in English (44-45). Gangaji's traditionalism and utilitarianism will later inspire Pandu to persuade his both wives, Kunti and Madri, into cuckoldry just to bring into the family suitable heirs in the form of Yudhishtir, Bhim, Arjun, Nakul and Sahadev.

There is another allusion to the history of India in the fourth book, "The Raj Quartet", when numerous Hastinapuris gathering to hear an address from Gangaji are marcilessly butchered and fatally wounded by the British military in the Bibigarh Garden. It is a direct reference to the Amritsar/Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919. As a result Gangaji launches the Quit India movement much like his historical counterpart, M. K. Ganghi organizing the Quit India movement. Gangaji's another extraordinary feat is, however, his intervention in the Budge Budge Jute mill colony crisis where the pay-hike demand of the industrial labourers are being continuously suppressed by the British mill-owners. Here also Gangaji's method of nonviolent Satyagraha proves to be the most effective weapon in the process of reconciliation between the two warring factions. A victorious Ganga Datta breaking his fast with lime juice provided by Sarah Moore amidst mass adulation bears direct allusion to Gandhi's own life. His peculiar ability to politicize fasting as a method to mobilize the mass and bring justice on earth gets recognized even when the labourers ironically have earned little profit and large loss in the bargain. He even achieves the lifelong accompaniment of Sarah Moore, a renegade English lady and sister of the jute mill owner, whom he calls, much like M. K. Gandh in real history, Sarah Behn, "Behn" denoting sisterhood. She, however, later in the eleventh book has to succumb to the strange, sexual experiments conducted by Ganga to achieve some mystical "Truth" that none other than him is eligible to know (228-229). This incident also has allusion to Gandhi's similar experiments that are shrouded in mystery being fastidiously suppressed by his followers who are anxious to protect his "holiness" among public.

Gangaji's much publicized Mango March in the sixth book, "Forbidden Fruit", has direct allusion to Gandhi's great Salt March to Dandi. His 288-mile march to one of his followers' mango garden just to violate the new colonial mango-tax law has much theatricality or politics of spectacle into it. His magnet-like attraction of the journalists as well as the mass and perpetual maintenance of the prospect of sudden arrest just added to the aura of his status as the supreme, national leader, the "Mahaguru", his popular name (122-124). This also has an echo of Gandhi's popular title—Mahatma. The civil disobedience movement that ensues is, however, inadvertently called off by Gangaji in spite of general criticism when a mob turns violent in Chaurasta (125-126). A parody of the historical Chauri Chaura incident is unmistakable here. In the same book there is a reference to the Gangaji's meeting with the Viceroy where he admits the circumstances leading him to drink goat-milk instead of cow milk (127-130). Even this also has direct allusion to Gandhi's own life.

Again Gangaji, the visionary, convinces Jayprakash Drona to be the tutor of the Pandavas. This move also will influence the political career of the Pandavas in future. Anyway, as Gangaji cannot tolerate any difference in ideas or views of his disciples, he decides to promote blind Dhritarashtra as his apparent heir in the Kaurava Party while radical Pandu, the organizer of masses. Again, due to his machination Pandu is forced later to resign from the mother party and form the branch called Onward Organization. This incident also has historical reference to the episode of Haripura Congress of 1938 when Subhashchandra Bose defeats Pattavi

Sitaramayya, the Gandhi-Nehru nominee, bringing in front the rift in the mother party. He, being frustrated with the orthodox party bosses, later forms the All India Forward Block. In the tenth book, "Darkness at Dawn", we find Gangaji again starting the Quit India movement, an allusion to the August Revolution. In the meantime Pandu dies in a desperate attempt to liberate India from outside. Gangaji also ironically discovers his inability to withhold the greed among his followers in the Kaurava Party in their attempt to hasten the process of achievement of official power through independence even when it demands partition of the country through communal riots. Mohammad Ali Karna, the deserted premarital son of Kunti and the humiliated, renegade Kaurava Party man, severs Karnistan out of the mother country for the Muslim folks. Ganga Datta, therefore, confines himself into a secluded life when ultimately Shikhandi takes her revenge, about which we have already mentioned earlier. His death on the bed of arrows and last drink of water in Arjuna's hand, both of which Ved Vyas dreams of in older age, have epical allusions (230-235).

Thus we can see that Gangaji is responsible for the occurrence of two unfortunate internecine conflicts that consequently prove fatal to the entire nation—one caused by his own contrivance between Dhritarashtra and Pandu; and the other by his own nonintervention policy between MohammadAli Karna and Dhritarashtra. Both of those ill-fated incidents could have been averted had Gangaji acted more prudently and impartially. At the end of the day he left the country bleeding and severed. His is no longer a personal tragedy; it is a national one instead. As in the real, historical plain M. K. Gandhi often egotistically as well as self-righteously has said, "My life is my message", the blemishes of his life ultimately fail to unite the nation in the time of its gravest crisis. Sashi Tharoor in a seriocomic vein has delved deep into the human frailties of M. K. Gandhi and presents us through the mock-epic medium with what might have been held blasphemous during the immediate post-Independence period but now must justly be called a postcolonial critique of Gandhi. As every satirical literature has a pleasantly curative purpose, *The Great Indian Novel* also probably aims to instruct its readers to take nothing at face value, to be critical of their past as well as present and to be responsible.

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