Revisiting the Epic of Mahabharata: a Case Study of Jaya By Devdutt Pattanaik

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Abstract: Human beings have always yearned to give a voice to their inner quirks and qualms. Since the inception of the languages, they are fond of narrating the social, private or public events in the delectable forms to amuse or give a didactic lesson to the audiences. The Indian classical epics were also written with the same view in mind i.e. to outreach the common ones and made them aware about the teachings of the Vedas in a simplified manner. Ramayana and Mahabharata are both the household names for the literate as well as for the illiterate folks. Multitudes of retellings of these epics have existed since ages depending upon the nature and requirements of audiences. Jaya: A retelling of Mahabharata has been written by Devdutt Pattanaik to address the needs of the tech savvy modern generation who belong to the 21st century and do not wish to delve much upon taking detours but wish to have a direct, logical and of course pleasing and fascinating narration of the events, a lucid and clear understanding of what’s and why’s. Devdutt has tried to present a soulful feast in terms of style of narration, sequencing, and techniques of storytelling. This research paper aims to foreground the task of Devdutt to put forward linguistic improvisations for whetting the appetite of the modern day readers.

Index Terms: Narrative, Epic, Mahabharatha, Jaya, Devdutt

I. INTRODUCTION

The term epic in its traditional sense refers to the lengthy narrative poem which is richly laden with the superior style and concerns the serious issues of the ancient people. The modern times have changed its form from merely poetic to prose, theatrical, drama etc. that considers the events of historical significance. It has forms like traditional epics and literary epics which are further classified into mythological epic, heroic epic, religious epic and mystical epic. With its grand style epic manifests sublimity in the use of words that further enhances its grandeur. The Enormousness of the theme is further evoked by heroic characters as well as the use of hyperbolic language. The presence of supernatural evokes extraordinariness. The narrator of the epic is inspired by the muse and it includes war and adventure. Indian epic constitutes three planes of understanding including ethical, political and spiritual. The personal struggle develops into the political combat. It reconstructs time and helps in rebuilding nation by its earnest narration of the ideals and desires of its people. Epics are identified to be the poems of the childhood of nations.

II. WHY RETELLINGS

While retelling or revisiting, we enter the old text with fresh eyes and thus it turns to be an act of survival for the classics. The modern age has different ideologies than the classics. Revisiting epics thrust new lives in the otherwise redundant ideologies of the epics and enthuse novel perspectives. Against the backdrop of new cultures, customs and the practices, the human relations of the past gets fore grounded thus validating the need of new existences. While revisiting epics the writers express their choice of re rendering of the original and so wish to transcribe and not to reside only in the fictional retentering. The retellings of an epic tell us so much in a little span. Successive retellings focus upon myriad images eventually turning inconspicuous into conspicuous. In India, the global market forces and its policies of liberalisation have given an impetus to the remembering of the epics. The adaptations highlight the dominant discourse of the times. The inherent qualities of the epics like orality, timelessess, universality and philosophical resistance make it imminently feasible to retell or reread them. Indian nationhood gained momentum with the weaving of Mahabharata in its fabric. Though it complicates negotiations with modernity particularly the alleys of spirituality and the past. Herman Oldenburg, David Shulman, and James Hegarty, consider Mahabharata to be dynamically and inherently instable thus making it suitable for adaptations. German ideologist Herman Oldenburg suggested that the Sanskrit Mahabharata mutated from a simple narrative about war and heroism to “the most monstrous chaos” [4][5] over several centuries. Complex linguistic hierarchies between Indian languages also impacted it and allowed it to represent India globally. Its self reflexibility has further made it open for future fiction renderings and retellings. Arti Dhand writes: “Mahabharata is what might cautiously be termed a pluralist text that engages a variety of religious doctrines and explicitly or tacitly permits them to coexist, without insisting on dogmatic uniformity. The text thus lends itself to multiple interpretations, and this may be telling of the historical period in which it was composed, as well as of the relatively ecumenical spirit of the text itself.[6][7].

A collective story that encapsulates the common worldview and authorises belief is mythic in nature. Apart from the contemporary understanding of the myth, the re-teller of the myth also generates a fantasy genre[8]. Myth emerges as the living fossil that eases the struggle of survival. It is both amusing and didactic and provides a contemporary novel horizon to the age old customs, conventions and role models. It provides a window to the classical world and the
contemporary can peep into the past to create the feeling of wonder, amazement and awe for the vivid imagination of the primitives. Retellings allow us to reclaim the past by reconnecting it to the modern readership and somehow helps to redefine a nation. Myth gets re-contextualized to put forth the contemporary readership and may sometimes progress or retrogress. It tends to be a distortion or an elaboration of the original. Modern variants of the myth not only narrate the past but also satire the prevailing politico-socio economic situations. But for the retellings, the classics are alive which would otherwise have become redundant and monotonous. Retellings breathe new life into the classic and the new voices, gestures and other social affectations get enthused zealously while the voices of antiquity may die out because of the novel connotations and deliberations. Retellings always tend to be diverse in their content, form and setting. Modern retellings celebrate the timelessness as well as the universality of the Mythology. The characters in these mythic writings may be the godly angels, villainous devils or the human beings residing in heaven, hearthside or in hell. Likewise the concepts of time, space and chronology are taken into consideration under no strict norms. The mythic stories present new perspectives which are localised and modernised as per the prevailing times[9].

India has witnessed a renaissance of modern reinterpretations and retellings of the classics. Past is reimagined in a multiple new perspectives thus putting forth and refracting the modern concerns resonating modern realities. These retelling try to prop the issues of modern readers who are not only engrossed in the quenching thirst of hoarding money but also are face to face with the loss of moral and ethical values. Retellings bridge the gap between profoundly rich past as well as the modern day reader. There is not a set laid out version of epic so the creators and audience both reimagines past and thus both explore and explode it. Wendy Doniger states that even though these epics have been delineated through Smriti, i.e. Orality yet they have survived through repetition and variant rereadings by additions, subtractions and revisions Instead, they want act of the re-visiting to facilitate a greater immersion in the text. It is of crucial significance that in hearing these tales, Hindus are being taught not about disconnected fictional heroes, but about themselves; both the epics, but particularly the Mahabharata, are rehearsals of Hindu identity. The epics then are fundamentally tools for the creative reflection, crafting, refinement, and ultimate public political assertion of Hindu identity.

Mahabharata is translated in almost all the Indian languages. In Indian context the word translation emerges as a misnomer. It is outrightly difficult to have a translation of such a fluid text which is considered to be a compilation by a few people and not a narrative work by Vyasa. It passed through numerous accretions and deletions through ages and definitely owing to its Orality. It is many a time compared to be a rolling stone that gathered a lot of moss passing from generation to generation. It is almost impossible to keep a record of all the adaptations of Mahabharata. Indian narratology is enriched by the flexible and elastic nature of the structure as well as fluidity of the narration. Vyasa himself created two versions of the epic namely Bharata which contained twenty four thousand shlokas. He further made additions to form an abridged version with one lakh shlokas consequently making it Mahabharata. Uthor himself has not put a limitation upon its defining boundary thus allowing reader to have freedom to read and retell as per his discretion and inclination. Influenced by the prevailing social, political and cultural environments, these retellings are channelizing the cultural continuation. New stories with varied novel shades are enriching the Indian literary tradition. There is no measure to evaluate its fidelity to the original texts. In Indian context the narratives are in the form of Katha that may both be audio or visual delving upon the stories of goodness, uprightness, wisdom and social responsibilities. Indian narrative considers chetna (understanding), viveka (intellect) and jnana (knowledge) and aims to have the complete ananda (bliss). Narrative foreground transience and transitivity by putting the follies and foibles of its characters and conceptualising human frailties and instabilities. Retellings are marked by the temporalities. Narrative of Mahabharata is itihasa (history) and has the intermingling of fiction now and myth/legend also. Mahabharata is a great epic -mahakavya which is divided further into cantos or sargas. The story is narrated in a slow, descriptive as well as in philosophical manner. The aim of the story is to cater to all the four stages of life i.e. from childhood to the old age. the story presents the whole gamut of human experiences as well as it gratifies the reader’s aesthetic pleasure.

Mahabharata classic has an embedded three layered narrative delineation by Sanjaya, Vaishampayana and Sauti. Gerard Genette in Narrative Discourse talks about different levels of narration. Mahabharata happens to be metadiegetic narrative while the narrators are intra-diagetic though they are capable of narrating in first person still they narrate in the third person. Mahabharata is a self sufficient text about which it is said that whatever exists anywhere can be found here. It profoundly puts across the completion of the narrative circuit. Various dialogic structures present lucid narration, description, augmentation, exposition as well as every sort of composition in third person narration exposing all the four themes of Dharm, Aartha Kama and Moksha. Thence the epic is described as ArthaSastra, Dharma Sastra, or Moksha Sastra. Because of its complex narrative system, it has been a task for the modern writers to retell and work upon. Complexity of its structure opens up the narrative possibilities for the modern writers. Every version has multiple loose ends that can be projected in multiple perspectives and forms. The modern day writers are either taking up subplots and writing upon them or leaving the digressions and sticking to the main storylines. They are reinterpreting characters, plots, incidents and philosophies adhering to the modern techniques of narration. Modern writers are creatively and logically exploring this story of human possibilities weaving human pathos, divinities and destinies. Many myths are either getting evolved or are being discarded. As per the fancies of the modern man, the characters are getting rejuvenated in more fleshy and humane forms rather than godly superhuman forms. Retellings aim to interpret Mahabharata as to explore the untravelled pathways.
Mahabharata has been rewritten and retold in various art forms and various languages. Authors claim almost a universalization of it because of its spread across generations, cultures, languages and mindsets. Pampa in Kannada, Nannayya, Tikanna, Yerrana in Telugu Sanjay in Bengali (10th, 11th, 13th, 14th and 15th centuries respectively) to mention a few wrote mahabharata. All the writers added their own stories or modified the existing ones. While the basic story line remained the same, the difference remained in the following of different narrative frameworks. Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute published its critical edition with 18 Parvans, 89000 verses in the constituted text and an elaborate critical apparatus. Romesh Chandra Dutt’s version of Mahabharata condensed age ancient Indian epic into English verse and published it in 1898. Indian writers made use of the several mythic strands in their novels eg. Raja Rao’s ‘Kanthapura, The Man-Eater of Malgudi’ by R.K.Narayan, ‘The Palace of Illusions’ by Chitra devkurni Banerjee, ‘The Great Indian Novel’ by ShashiTharoor, Girish Karnad’s ‘Yayati’ , Aditya Iyengar’s ‘Thirteenth Day: A story of Kurukshetra war’, Kavita Kane’s ‘Karna’s Wife’ to mention a few. Jaya is also the reteeing of the Mahabharta which we are going to consider as a present case study[1].

Regarding Jaya by Devdutt Pattanaik

At the very outset Devdutt Pattanaik deserves applaud for accomplishing such a garguantum task of rewriting Mahabharata in such a lucid manner. It is a feast for those who wishes to taste the wisdom of the world’s longest epic. Author has contained the epic in 300 pages and it makes sense of everything that is put at a broad canvas of Mahabharata. Jaya is an extremely well written story presented systematically in 18 sections and 108 chapters maintaining just the right balance between detail and brevity. Jaya presents a whole range of characters that at first seems to be quite cumbersome but on reading further these characters start falling in the sequence generating pleasure of knowing them well. 108 chapters appear to be a narration of 108 stories which are further authenticated and validated and wound together by the writes with the help of the vignettes. All the more these vignetting inform about the different variants in various cultures and prove the objectivity and the erudition of the writer. He clears certain conceptions as well as misconceptions about the epic by giving his own interpretation and explanation. With the objective narration of the entire story, no one is lauded as hero and put forward as a villain even in the end. Author has a mastery craft of putting his points forward without affecting the mind of the reader through what he thinks is appropriate or good. Though Kauravas were portrayed as villains and the Pandus as heroes but the retelling establishes everyone to be a villain in its own way in one sense or the other. Devdutt has tried to satiate the contemporary minds by exposing the relativity of the situation and circumstances rather than finding faults with the individual characters.

The beauty of the narration by Devdutt lies in the fact that the story in told in the same time span with the same vision of scope. In order to please the logical senses of the contemporary readers, he has tried to create a chain of events oriented by logics. Eg. Gandhar lost her 100 sons as she had put hot water on the family of 100 ants with a myriad of plots and sub plots, Devdutt has remained strong with the narrative commiserating the time, space and relationship nexus in such a masterly way that it has emerged to be the Mahabharata of the common 21st century man.

Though the fidelity to the original text cannot be fully evaluated but it cheers with the idea of not determining fidelity in the close proximity of the original in the present age of transmedia. Popularity, persistence and diversity have disseminated a whole chunk of popularity to the writer thus making him a household name. Essentially a complete rendition of Mahabharata expresses glaring differences from the original by adding regional variants To mention a few, Parashara in his lust blesses Satyavati to impeccable beauty and fragrance while in Devdutt’s rendition Satyavati uses her sexual powers for her upliftment. Devdutt puts a Judgement upon Janamejaya. The following statements prove it ‘Janamejaya, in your family, sterile men became fathers by asking gods to visit their wives.’ or ‘Janamejaya, your family destroyed a forest, killing countless birds and beasts, to establish their city. Devdutt tells that Pandavas were asked by Krishna to burn the Khandava forest. Yudhishthira told Draupadi to go and yield to Kichaka if necessary because for greater good their identity cannot be disclosed. The author is aware that he is writing for the postmodern readership and so he tries to express logic for every action. E.g Duryodhana has vowed for a single wife Bhanumati so he didn’t attend Draupadi’s Sawayamber. Instead he asked Karna to attend the same[2].

Social fabric is presented very effectively in the story. Pattanaik highlighted Drona’s poverty by telling that ‘he did not even possess a single cow in his household (Pattanaik .57). Devdutt presented the Indian Social necessity of having wife and children. Pandu gives away his wives to produce heirs[3]. The retelling focuses upon giving a discourse on dharma and social order. Issues like who will father the son etc are narrated quite objectively. Importance is given to having a wife and children in this form of society. This is evident in many places. The fact that Pandu gives away his wife to produce offspring, shows the importance of sons (they were the heirs of the king) in the household thus soliciting and obliging to the age old patriarchal thoughts.

A number of additions, embellishments and distortions mark the narrative of Jaya. The episode of Gandhari’s foetus, the story of Satyavati, the story of Bhishma’s vow, the narrative regarding the battle of Parashurama, and the battle at night. His anecdotes bring forth the understanding of the deeper meanings understands symbolism and characters and attachment of the references to the substance provide more enlightenment. The wonder and the amazement of the rich reservoirs of Indian Vedic teachings are resonating beautifully in the retelling of Jaya by Devdutt Pattanaik. Delineating the behaviours of the characters in the entire fabric of narration, Devdutt had culminated his journey with Yudhishthira’s Jaya over himself. Devdutt weaves the single narrative plot from the Sanskrit classic and given little known details Like the names of the
hundred Karvas, the stories of Astika, Madhavi, Jamini, Aravan and Barbareek are delineated by Devdutt. He has presented the entire narrative with simplicity and clarity in the same way as a grandmother narrates the story. The book is marked by the presence of illustrations that add to universal axiom that a picture is worth thousand a words. The images speak for themselves e.g the visual images of Saarthi advising Arjuna or battle between Shikhandi and Bihima. Jaya is quite an accumulation of all the prevalent beliefs regarding the epic across the entire territory and abroad and has provided a meaningful essence to the readers. Narrative is always uprightly moving ahead at a fast pace making the present discourse as an umbrella for all prevalent folklores. Definitely it is quite an interesting narrative that has an ending which is not told in any retelling yet. The ending has become a reason to call it as Jaya which was originally called by Vyasa. With its unique style, Jaya has become a story of choosing the way of life.

III. CONCLUSION

The epics have been told and retold time and again with multiple interpretations. Revisiting epics bring an agelessness to the otherwise aged classics. By revisiting the classics not only the age old wisdom is presented but the old systems are validated and judged to bring forth the best in the present.

To quote Devdutt himself "Wear the lens of modernity and you would suddenly see a very different epic. I think the best gift of post-modern literature studies is this, because it questions the intent of the writers. And I question the writers in the early 20th century who claim to be telling you what tradition is when in fact they're projecting their own politics into the narrative and distorting the past so as to justify the present."

"All rewritings [. . .] reflect a certain ideology and a poetics and as such manipulate literature to function in a given society in a given way. Rewriting is manipulation, undertaken in the service of power, and in its positive aspect can help in evolution of a literature and a society. Rewriting can introduce new concepts and new genres, new devices and the history of translation is the history also of literary innovation. But rewriting can also repress innovation, distort and contain." (Lefevere, Rewriting vii)

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