



MYTHICAL METHOD IN K. P. BALJI'S NOVEL *ABHIMANYU*

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Abstract: The present paper provides a deep insight into an unexplored fictional work as *Abhimanyu* written by an Indian novelist K.P. Balaji, who is virtually obscure to many readers. The reason is precisely the premature death of Balaji in an air crash, but before his death he has left only one superb work in terms of his innovation and experimentation with a technique known as the "Mythical Method". In fact it was T.S.Eliot, who, for the first time coined this critical term in his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses* in 1923, which was published in *The Dial*. Eliot argues that the modern artist may use the "mythical method" as a substitute for the "narrative method" and it consists in a continuous parallel between antiquity and contemporaneity. Eliot himself experimented this technique in the masterpiece of his earlier phase *The Wasteland*. K.P.Balaji draws similar kind of parallelism between the mythic hero of *Mahabharata* *Abhimanyu* and the modern hero *Kesavan*, who is a college student. The advantage of using this method for Balaji was that he could give a distinct form and significance to the chaotic history of post independent India.

Key Words: mythical method, marginalized, orientalism, colonialism, post colonialism.

The novel entitled *Abhimanyu*, written by K P Balaji may be interpreted as a redefinition and re-interpretation of the history of post independent India. This is an experimental novel, using the modern fictional technique *The Mythical Method* which was coined by T.S.Eliot in his review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. In fact this is the only novel that K. P. Balaji had written before his untimely sad demise in an air crash at Bombay in 1976. He was associated with *Marg* under Mulk Raj Anand, and later with *Times of India* and *The illustrated Weekly of India*. He was also a phenomenal photographer, an artist and was associated with the Bombay film industry. So besides journalism, Balaji was also concerned with his creative explorations leading to the publication of one of the finest novels *Abhimanyu*.

In this novel the central character and the tragic protagonist is *Kesavan Nair*, a college student who is portrayed as modern *Abhimanyu*. The same thing happens in case of James Joyce, who uses mythical title *Ulysses* in order to justify that the modern tragic hero *Leopold Bloom* appears as the modern *Ulysses*. Just as James Joyce, K.P.Balaji has used the mythical method in his novel *Abhimanyu* and identical patterns may be traced between the two

novels. For example, Joyce derives the story of *Ulysses* from Homer's *Odyssey* and K P Balaji derives the myth of *Abhimanyu* from Vyasas Epic *The Mahabharata*. In this context the point of reference is drawn from a mythic material and mythic perspective. Janet Powers Gemill remarks:

Until his death in an air crash in 1976 K.P. Balaji was a man of extraordinary talents: advertising man, artist and photographer. *Abhimanyu*, his first full-length novel, proves that he was a writer with great sensitivity. The book takes its title from *Mahabharata*, incident in which Arjuna's son breaks through the enemy's lotus formation in battle wreaks havoc but cannot escape. The *Abhimanyu* of this story is *Kesavan*, an intelligent boy from a lower middle-class family, who gets involved in politics and is accidentally shot in a demonstration over *Parkinsonpet*, an obscure border area which the Militant Socialist Party has put forth as its cause. We observe *Kesavan* from the viewpoint of his well-meaning parents, who cannot understand the sudden changes in his lifestyle or his expulsion from school. We see him falling in love with *Nalini*

and exchanging notes with her via encyclopaedia volumes in the library. We also follow his attempts to dissuade the student group from violence and thus find it intensely ironic when he becomes the victim of a gunshot during a scuffle with police. Kesavan is a tragic hero, who has brought about his own down-fall, yet is also trapped by the very nature of outside organizers fomenting student's politics. Balaji's style is finely tuned doing full justice to his subject matter. One regrets only that no more fine novels will flow from his pen. (239)

The "prologue", attached to the novel explicitly indicates the fact that K.P. Balaji was pursuing the "mythical method" as a prominent modern fictional technique:

Abhimanyu was the son of Arjuna, the third of the Pandava brothers in the epic, *Mahabharata*. According to the story, he was a noble prince, the nephew of Krishna, and the most likely heir to the Pandava throne. It is said that when he was still in his mother's womb, Krishna visited his sister and with divine prescience, forecast the course of events which would lead to the battle of Kurukshetra. He spoke of the Fratricidal war between the Pandavas and the Kauravas, and how the latter would make their battle array: the 'padmavyuha' in the shape of a many-petalled lotus. He explained the tactics of breaking into this circle of mighty warriors- but then, inexplicably, finding his sister asleep and noticing that the child in the womb was 'listening', fell silent. Abhimanyu was sent into battle by Yudhishtira, the eldest of the Pandavas. Relying on his foetal memory, the prince fought his way in, wreaking havoc in the Kaurava ranks. And then he was trapped and killed (Balaji i).

The "Mythical method", which K.P. Balaji executed in his novel *Abhimanyu*, was actually a critical doctrine formulated by T.S. Eliot in his famous review of James Joyce's *Ulysses*. This review was published in the November 1923 issue of *The Dial*. Eliot writes:

In using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr. Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him. They will not be imitators, anymore than the scientist, who uses the discoveries of an Einstein in pursuing his own, independent, further investigations. It is simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history. It is a method already adumbrated by Mr. Yeats, and of the need for which I believe Mr. Yeats to have been the first contemporary to be conscious... instead of narrative methods, we may now use the mythical method. It is, I seriously believe, a step toward making the modern possible for art (480-483).

In fact, nowhere does K.P. Balaji confess the fact that he has pursued the mythical method, as formulated by T.S. Eliot, in his novel. But it is quite interesting to observe the fact, while the novel is critically read with reference to the myth of the *Mahabharata*. However, it is quite ostensible that Balaji refers to this concept in the prologue, which comes before the text. In the prologue there is an implicit reference to the fact that the novelist builds a continuous parallelism between Kesavan, the hero of the novel and Abhimanyu, the mythic hero of the *Mahabharata*. Resemblances can be noticed between the mythic hero and the modern hero in terms of the complex situation which victimizes both of them. Just as Abhimanyu, Kesavan entered the complicated and troublesome situation but once caught in the trap, there was no way out. The *Mahabharata* refers to the conflicting situation resulted from brotherly rivalry leading to a devastating war. Similarly in the modern situation, as the novel proposes between the college students led by Gopalan, the leader and secretary of the town branch militant socialist party. He may be identified with Lord Krishna, who provoked the Pandava brothers to fight against the Kauravas for their rightful claim of five villages. In fact, the five villages, refer to in the *Mahabharata* may

be compared with Parkinsonpet, which is an obscure village in the border of the state. Parkinsonpet is described as:

A five miles stretch of lands and group of huts that no one bought a few half-starved wretches had so far cared to call their own! Not worthy to be made an issue, and yet... (Balaji 70)

T.S. Eliot himself executed the mythical method in *The Wasteland* which was the masterpiece of his earlier phase. He was probably suggesting what the contemporary artists could learn from Joyce's *Ulysses*. In his opinion this novel was the most important expression which the present age had found. Particularly, its "mythical method" was a breakthrough which other writers must exploit. K.P. Balaji must have been influenced by Eliot's remark which is quite evident from the kind of parallelism which is drawn in *Abhimanyu* between the myth of the *Mahabharata* and the contemporary history of India which is chaotic after the end of the colonial rule. This is how Balaji invents, imagines and fictionalizes the history of the post independent and post colonial period. The whole nation's history is reflected and projected in the light of the chaotic scenario of one South Indian state as Kerala. Although nowhere Balaji makes any explicit reference to Kerala, the characters and incidents amply justify the fact that the setting of the novel is in the state of Kerala. This also leads to the observation that Balaji is redefining and reinterpreting the history of the nation. Actually there is a sharp distinction between the official history and the history which is fictionalised. The official history rejects the actual story of and suffering of the Subaltern. The voice of the marginalised groups, the social underdogs the depraved teeming millions are suppressed and repressed. But what lies below the water-mark of the iceberg is revealed in postcolonial novels. Balaji's *Abhimanyu* is a post colonial novel, because it is concerned with orientalism, colonialism and post colonialism. Orientalism is a term innovated by Edward Said and it is a construct of the East by the West. The Western colonial rulers imposed their

superiority over the people of the least. So the people of the West are represented as the self, the civilized, the rational and the superior race. On the other hand the people of the East are represented as the backward, the barbarous, the superstitious and the inferior mass. This is how the colonial rulers of the West justified colonialism. But after independence the native writers of the colonized country retorted to the colonial masters by writing novels in English language. In other words these postcolonial writers dismantled the house of their master with their tools. The tools refer to the English language which becomes a weapon by means of which they resist the colonial forces. In *Abhimanyu* there are several references to colonialism. For example, Father Joshe represents the colonial legacy in terms of his stern administration. In the novel it is also alleged that Father Joshe exercises religious colonialism in his educational institution. Similarly Parkinsonpet is described in the novel as the last outpost of colonial rule in terms of the presence of one Englishman who was a retired Army officer.

In the novel *Abhimanyu* it is also described that in the present scenario there is still a hangover of colonial experience. The present Government, led by the Congressmen and the followers of Gandhi are described as the substitutes and the modern versions of the British colonial rulers. The dreams and aspirations of the common mass were shattered. The living condition of the poor and the needy was not at all improved. Poverty, starvation, unemployment and suffering were endless. The Government did nothing other than imposing taxes, tear gas and rampant corruption.

The history of the post independent and post colonial India is an "immense panorama" which has been artistically presented in *Abhimanyu* by the mythical method. In his review of *Ulysses* Eliot proclaims the "narrative method" should be rejected and it should be replaced by the "mythical method". It is precisely a method of condensation and compression, for which the novel assumes a coherent, but complex form. It is the result of the juxtaposition between antiquity and

contemporaneity, myth and modernity, past and present. It is by this the *contemporary chaotic history* is given a comprehensive meaning and significance. About the contemporary history, Kesavan's father, Govindan Nair, adequately reveals before the bicycle repair shop owner, Ali. He describes the town as "a town of pale Ghosts in neon lights". Similarly in pg. 9 of the text Govindan Nair provides a detailed description of the chaotic history of the present time by reflecting on the scenario of the town. It is characteristically a town of "black marketers and gold smugglers". He further says:

Politics. That was it. Everything was politics. It was a miasma that enveloped all, tainted everything it touched. There was evidence of it everywhere, on walls with slogans written in tar and whitewash, vying for attention under cinema posters displaying a surfeit of feminine charms. Nair felt helpless and vulnerable as he walked, surrounded, he felt, by invisible forces of evil. (Balaji 9)

"Narrative method" turned obsolete and modern novelists were in search of new fictional techniques. In this context myth provided a solution to the novelist in the matter of controlling and ordering the form of the novel. In this sense the "mythical method" as proposed by Eliot could solve the problem of communication which the artist was confronting in the context of modernity. It could provide a continuous parallel between an ordered world of myth and a chaotic world of contemporary history. In keeping the chaos of his own time on the surface the artist becomes true to history. Similarly, in referring this chaos to a timeless order, he becomes true to art. It is by this that the modern novelist or the poet impels his readers to learn the myth. The reader has to hold the myth in his mind as reference point. He is supposed to manipulate the parallel between the world of myth and the world of the present time. The basic idea of the *Mahabharata* or the archetype is the conquest of good over evil, whereas K.P.Balaji's novel provides just mimicry of this conquest of good over evil. Because the epilogue of the novel amply justifies the fact that Kesavan's

death cannot make his father as strong and formidable as Arjuna, who avenges the death of his son and kills Jayadratha. On the contrary Kesavan's death is followed by the arrangement of a condolence meeting which was attended by District Collector, the police commissioner and Govindan Nair was invited to speak a few words in the meeting. But Govindan began to falter and tremble and he struggled for words. In this context Govindan is absolutely desperate, who has lost his only son and he cannot avenge the death of his son in anyway. The State Government and the policeman are more powerful and Govindan is a mere common citizen who has no adequate strength to fight against the killers of his son. However, the parallelism indicated by the title of the novel compels the reader to see Hastina and the state of Kerala in conjunction. It is due to this fact that one is anxious to extract some kind of meaning from the apparent meaninglessness of the contemporary incidents. Thus, the *Mahabharata* provides the frame of reference which brings the chaos of the contemporary history of India under control. It endows it with a pattern, with meaning and significance. The astonishing bulk of detail in the novel forces the reader to integrate them and perceive the pattern. It is through this that K.P.Balaji was perhaps pointing out a basic disposition of the reader to comprehend that pattern.

T.S. Eliot declares in his review *Ulysses* that the modern writers have to follow James Joyce in order to achieve the desired effect in a work of art. Particularly he speaks highly of Joyce's use of mythical method as a modern fictional technique. In this connection Balaji's novel *Abhimanyu* may be compared with Joyce's *Ulysses*. In his novel Joyce made use of the Homeric allusions which play a vital role in bringing about the overall effect of the work. Similarly, K.P.Balaji draws the allusions from the *Bhagvad Gita*, when Gopalan stresses so much on "the purposeful action". Similarly he draws allusions from the Bhagavata Purana, which contains the story of Ajamila. Similarly there are references to Gandhi, Marx and Lenin. These allusions vary in density and directness. They take on an ironic note where they

are clear and direct. Such ironic traits draw attention to the differences and they prevent us from equating *Abhimanyu* with the mythic parallelism of the *Mahabharata*. At the same time the allusions draw the archaic world into the contemporary life which is depicted in the novel. The chief function of the allusions is to draw attention to the virtual features of the two worlds. At times the myth of *Mahabharata* is referred to be understood as everyday aspects of life. For example, in the story of *Mahabharata*, Abhimanyu enters the Padmavyuha with arms and weapons. On the other hand, in Balaji's novel, Kesavan confronts the police force without any arm or weapon. In this context, the things which remain implicit or even totally concealed in the *Mahabharata* are revealed in Balaji's novel *Ulysses*. The change of perspective from Vyasa's *Mahabharata* to the present reality and the present back to the archaic world enables both past and present to illuminate one another. A background is projected through the allusions which embraces the whole ancient Indian literature. As we recognize the implications of the allusions, we try to equate them with the events which are set before us. But sometimes we also find that they do not coincide. For example, the capitalists, the politicians of the ruling party and the colonizers and the police ruled state do not exactly coincide Duryodhana, his other Kaurav brothers, his other allies like Karna, Drona and Bhishma. This makes us aware of the differences and the process of equating and differentiating becomes stimulating for us. So the allusions offer a background which remains fluid and this very fluidity is the fundamental element for the effect of the novel *Abhimanyu*. One interesting difference between two couples whom we recognize in the novel, one couple is Abhimanyu and Uttara and the other couple is Kesavan and Nandini. Abhimanyu and Uttara are married and she is already pregnant before Abhimanyu goes to participate in the battle. On the other hand Kesavan and Nandini are not yet married, although they make promise to each other that they will get married. Secondly, Uttara never influenced Abhimanyu as his wife to dissuade himself from fighting in the battle. On the other hand Nandini is

very emotional and she requests her lover not to entangle himself in strikes and processions. Uttara conducts as the typical wife of a hero. But compared to Uttara, Nandini is timid and she is absolutely scared of the consequences of launching protest against the state Government. In fact in terms of heroic proportions and dimensions Kesavan cannot be equated with Abhimanyu. These are the interesting differences that emerge when we compare myth with modernity. Such differences make us aware of the fact that the modern world can no longer produce such great heroes as Arjuna and Abhimanyu. The author of the novel in the process of equating Kesavan with Abhimanyu brings out such illuminating differences in the mind of the readers. So, actual reality neither consists in the ancient myth nor in the contemporary reality. But the actual reality is something which is the outcome of the juxtaposition between antiquity and contemporaneity. The outcome may be described as something unique, which neither contains absolutely the past nor the present, but something new or a "third something".

K.P. Balaji had to examine the past for new source of strength and ultimately it was an epic written 5000 years ago, which solved his problem. His use of the myth is not from narrative point of view, but of bringing juxtaposition between the past and the present. In mythical method the incidents, the words and symbols are inextricably fused together. This is how Balaji has been quite successful in the manipulation of the point of view, which is a hallmark of the twentieth century experimental fiction. In fact the point of view is nothing but the vision of reality and the experience of the whole lifetime which brings past and present into a fusion. Balaji was convinced that he can free his text from the narrative strain by pursuing the ideal of compression through the mythical method. In fact the ideal compression can be practised in art in terms of the artists' awareness of his point of view. Ultimately the mythical method brought a solution with regard to the problem of the form of the fiction. It was Balaji's pre-occupation with the form

of the novel and his quest for the form, which led to his quest for the form, which led to his quest for myth. A good writer always has a point of view, a “soul”, which imposes a form on reality in which everything is given a new place and a new significance. In case of Balaji, what is artistically relevant is not the *Mahabharata* as the source of the materials, but their successful integration. This is a problem faced by a modern writer in relation to the chaotic experience of modern man. He was concerned with the problem of expression when a whole generation has lost the power of

understanding itself. This is an age when man grows up absurd lacking any sense of direction, not quite aware of his identity or destiny. So Balaji’s search for the mythical basis is realized in his preoccupation with the vision with the form of the novel. Ultimately the myth of the *Mahabharata* was capable of being re-moulded into living patterns in terms of the protagonist and his absurd destiny. It is precisely this sense of myth as pattern as framework of truth that is realized in the complete experience of living in the post independent Indian scenario.

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