



VOICE OF A VILLAIN: REINTERPRETING MAHABHARATA MYTH IN AJAYA

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Abstract: Myths are not just fantasies; they have their own importance in the development of humanity. They are part of our cultures and civilizations. Myth has various reasons and conditions of origin, gets stabilized in the form of a story and travelled from one generation to another, from one culture to another and from one language to another. The characteristic feature of myth and literature is that it is deeply rooted in life and extended in different directions for different purposes. Mahabharata is a celebration of ancient Indian history and culture. The greatness of Mahabharata is due to its characteristics as itihasa-purana. Mahabharata and Ramayana myths are employed in modern times to reconstruct or deconstruct them. These epics are not enforced as religious texts by modern writers but they are re-contextualized and revised with different intensions and ideological purposes. Mahabharata celebrates multiple heroes. But Kauravas are presented mostly as evil minded and those standing against dharma. Anand Neelakantan, in his book *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*, tells the story from Kaurava's perspective. This book shows altogether different side of Duryodhana, who is named as Suyodhana in this book. He is shown as a kind hearted and compassionate prince who was against the norms of caste system and believed that ability and not birth should decide what a person can or can't do.

Key words: Myth, Tradition, Myth Reinterpretation, Mahabharata, Epic.

The present research article attempts to study the novel *Ajaya*, written by Anand Neelakantan, as an attempt to revisit the great Indian epic, *Mahabharata* from the perspective of Kaurava prince Duryadhana. From our childhood, *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* have imbibed our minds with the stories of struggle between vice and virtue, between hero and villain. We never try to question their authenticity, as questioning it may lead to shaking and shattering our own beliefs. These beliefs, which are part of our personality and identity, are made up by our myths and history. Both these epics are great source of ethics, lessons from human behaviors and their consequences.

Mahabharata is one of the two most influential Indian epics. It provides a wide basis in the affirmation of Indian myths and mythology. *Mahabharata* is believed to be composed in three stages. The first version had 24000 verses entitled as *Jaya* - the story of victory. *Jaya* is the history written by Vyasa of the Pandava and their victory over Kauravas. Later on Vaisampayana, disciple of Vyasa extended the epic *Jaya* into *Bharata* by including

legendary stories and augmenting philosophical materials into the epic. Later Sauti Ugraseravas expanded *Bharata* into *Mahabharata* by extending its length to more than one lakh verses. During these expansions it absorbed many digressions and became encyclopedic epic.

The greatness of *Mahabharata* is due to its characteristics as itihasa-purana. It is metaphysical poetry, playing abstract concepts with clarity. It provides a vast gallery of variety of characters. It talks of human welfare, insights of human nature, drives, worldly activities and life. It embodies most of the knowledge of Indian mythology, law, ethics, state craft, art of war, history and ethnology. Therefore ancient, medieval and modern writers have found *Mahabharata* and its stories as excellent vehicles for the expression of their creativity.

Mahabharata served as a source for some of the finest creations in all ancient and modern Indian languages. In Sanskrit, the four pillars namely Kalidasa, Bhasa, Dandin and Magha dramatized and romanticized the text and contents of *Mahabharata* in order to suit the literary tastes of their generations.

Contemporary Indian writers use myth to very large extent. Myth is deployed to express the contemporary human conditions. During freedom struggle they were employed to arouse national pride, awareness of the self and involvement in anti-colonial struggle. Now it is used to comment on the post-colonial situations with doubts, despair and dilemma. Situations and characters from epics are taken again and again for the reinterpretations of political, social and mental states. Ramayana and Mahabharata have characteristics of exhaustibility in interpretative potential and offered writers across Indian languages and English the inspiration for creative writings. These writers subverted the myths through political, social and ethical interrogation. The use of myths resulted in reinforcement or reinterpretation of nature, society and human relationship from new and radical point of view.

Furthermore, these writers took this opportunity to apply new perspectives on the established myths. Feminism came into force and Ramayana and Mahabharata can be studied from the point of view of Sita and Draupadi or Gandhari. The voice of the oppressed and marginalized became prominent through the characters like Eklavya and Karna. This was the attempt to employ myth to focus on the discriminations in our contemporary society. The marginalized sections in social order as women, dalits, and minorities got the voice in the same language and mode to question the notions of democracy, human rights and social justice.

Mahabharata and *Ramayana* myths are employed in modern times to reconstruct or deconstruct them. These epics are not enforced as religious texts by modern writers but they are re-contextualized and revised with different intensions and ideological purposes.

Myth can also be used in the way of interrogating the traditions and the customs, which have its origins in myths. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni and Gita Hariharan both use myth and question the very roots of myth. Their basic concern is the treatment of female characters in myth, in their novels and in mythic society and present society.

They are not contemporizing the myth by they are opening new avenue of injustice on the part of women by posing mythical women characters. These are attempts to raise feminine voice through the medium of changing the tone and narration of the known stories and known characters. Feminism, as it is regarded as very recent field of inquiry into sociology, literature and all other studies, is very aptly used by these novelists in the traditional and mythic stories. *Thousand faces of Night* deals with the neglected female characters as Gandhari, Amba, Ganga etc. On the other hand, *The Palace of Illusions* is the first person narration of Draupadi - Panchali. Both the novelists and novels are concerned with the fate of women in the hands of men - in both epics and modern times. Shashi Tharoor uses the canvas of Mahabharata to portray the History of modern India from pre-independence to eighties. And the mode he uses is satirical. Tharoor is presenting characters, intrigues, heroes and their counterfoils, and he adopts the structure of Mahabharata to fit his story. Mahabharata a multilayered epic is the only model for Tharoor to present his story.

Mahabharata is a celebration of ancient Indian history and culture. Unlike Ramayana it celebrates multiple heroes- Krishna, Pandavas, Karna, Kauravas and many more. Almost all characters are personified human tendencies. Krishna, incarnation of Vishnu plays vital role most crucial moments in the story and is said to be responsible for the fate of most of the characters, but on the philosophical level, destiny plays more important role and characters suffer because they have to. But Kauravas are presented mostly as evil minded and those standing against *dharma*.

It is a well-known fact that history is always written from winner's perspective. We tend to develop a notion about any historic event based upon the story which is told to us. It's not easy for us to think about the other side of story. It is a psychological fact that human beings try to avoid the questions which are difficult to answer. Anand Neelakantan tries to answer these types of questions in his book *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice*. What if Kauravas

were not as bad as they are generally marked in all the Mahabharata retellings? What if Krishna was not a God incarnation and just an imposer? What if the Dharma which Yudhishtira and Pandavas uphold, was itself malicious?

Our perceptions of history and myth are formed as we receive these from generations earlier. The caste, creed, country and race may change our perception of history and myth. In the author's note, we come across the writer's view of Duryodhana as a person, as a common human being without any divine or heavenly patronage. What made him rewrite the story of *Mahabharata* was procession. In south India, the writer came across a religious procession in which Duryodhana, a Kshatriya prince is a principal deity, in the name of whom a temple is built with the assumption that the deity still answers the prayers of the destitute and those suffering from diseases, poverty or harassment from those stronger than themselves. This deity is the protector of the weak and downtrodden.

This incident made the writer revisit *Mahabharata* from a different perspective. He began to see Duryodhana as a hero living with his own principles.

“Once I started viewing the Kaurava Prince through the eyes of the villagers of Poruvyazhy a different picture of Duryodhana began to emerge - far removed from the scheming, roaring, arrogant villain of popular television serials and traditional retailings. Instead, here was a brutally honest Prince; brave and self willed, willing to fight for what he believed in. Duryodhana never believed his Pandava cousin to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present day political propaganda used to fool gullible public.”
(*Ajaya*, p 7)

The writer further asserts his reason of rewriting Mahabharata from completely opposite perspective;

“Duryodhana's personality comes alive when he makes Karna the king of Anga at a crucial moment in his life, when he is being humiliated

because of his caste. The Kaurava of Princess challenges orthodoxy by making a Suta a king; and he does so without selfish motives. His treatment of Eklavya; his refusal to fight for Subhadra; his courage in taking on the Pandavas; and his unwavering faith in his friends; all make him hero material rather than despicable villain. He never attempts to justify his treatment of Draupadi. His flaws make him human and believable, unlike the protagonists, who rapped themselves in a cloak of *Dharma*, miracles and divinity, to justify their actions.”

(p 7)

A lot of retellings of Mahabharata have been written but this is perhaps the first one which tells the story from Kaurava's perspective. This book shows altogether different side of Duryodhana, who is named as Suyodhana in this book. Even his brother Dushasana is named as Sushasana and sister Dushala as Sushala. Herein 'du' means evil whereas 'su' means virtuous. In the novel, Sushasana was not evil; he was just another prince as Pandavas. He is shown as a kind hearted and compassionate prince who was against the norms of caste system and believed that ability and not birth should decide what a person can or can't do.

The book starts with Gandhari being captivated by Bheeshma to get her married with the blind prince Dhritrashtra. In the process Gandhar Kingdom is destroyed which leaves Shakuni, the young Gandhar Prince burning with vengeance. Highlight of this book is characterization of Shakuni, Drona, Kripa, Charvaka, Eklavya, Jarasandha, Shishupala, Balrama and most importantly Krishna. Drona is the teacher of princes who favoured Pandavas over Kauravas. Kripa is a Brahmin who doesn't believe in caste system and Carvaka is an atheist. Jarasandha and Shishupala have been shown as kind and noble kings as opposed to other versions in which they are shown as villains. Krishna is a charming prince who thinks of himself as God incarnation and feels it's his moral duty to behold the Dharma. We find some shades of grey in his

character which is contrary to popular version of Mahabharata.

The readers see many evidences in which Pandavas and their ally criticize Sudhodhana on the blindness of his father. Bhima, Suyodhana's cousin, threatens the prince like this..

“I will find you Suyodhana, and drag you out from whichever rat hole you are hiding in. You coward! *Come out!* I am not blind like your father. I will find you and thrash you...” (p18)

Their teacher Drona, who is supposed to be fair with every disciple, also leaves no chance to humiliate Suyodhana due to blindness of his father.

“I know you are dumb and like your father, blind to right and wrong. But are you deaf as well?” (p 74)

“If you befriend a blind man's son, what else will you see?” (p77)

Suyodhana questions himself,

“Why did the Guru drag his blind father into everything? Was it his fault that he was blind?” (p77)

The book raises a lot of questions regarding the society at that time and twists of laws and accepted behaviours by so called upholders of Dharma for their own benefit. How do you justify Krishna forcing Draupadi insulting Karna in the swayamvar so that Arjuna can win even though Karna hit the target? In that time a woman was allowed to marry four men but if she marries more than four men, she was considered to be a prostitute. Yet, Kunti forced Draupadi to marry all five of her sons so that they stay united. Didn't Kunti trust her sons or her upbringing that a mere entry of a woman in household can separate them? How can you hand over the whole nation to a bunch of males who can't control their lust for the wife of their own brother? Touching a lower caste human was Adharma but forcing a newly wedded girl to share the bed of five

brothers was considered Dharma? And more over just after Arjuna's marriage with Draupadi, who was forced to spend first year with Yudhishtir, Krishna executes his plan of getting Arjuna married with his sister Subhadra. Another interesting angle shown in the book is love story of Suyodhana and Subhadra, a marriage which was sanctioned by both Dhritrashtra and Balrama and which did not take place because Subhadra eloped with Arjuna on provocation by Krishna. All these questions cannot be answered by any logical explanation if Pandavas were upholders of Dharma and Kauravas were the evil incarnations.

The book ends with the epic game of dice played between Yudhishtira and Suyodhana which was controlled by Shakuni with his magical dice. Everyone remembers the scene in which Draupdi is disrobed but how we simply ignore the fact that it was Yudhishtira who puts his own wife as a materialistic thing on gamble. This shows the mentality of society towards Woman during that period. Suyodhana even offered to end the game in middle and return everything which Yudhishtira lost but he didn't agree. One particular point which I am not able to accept is how can Yudhishtira claim his wife Draupadi and put her on gamble after losing himself in a previous chance? The first part ends on a note where Draupadi is being called in the Sabha after Yudhishtira lost her in the game of dice.

The book is not just about writing the story from an opposite perspective but about questioning the absurd but socially accepted norms. We do need to accept that the time in which Mahabharata story took place is much different from current time but not everything can be answered by telling that it was God's wish. This book is a food for thought and makes you question your own beliefs. It forces you to think from a perspective which is drastically different from your own.

Reference:

1. *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* by Anand Neelakantan. Google ebook, 2013.