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RESEARCH ARTICLE

AN EPIC RETOLD: A CRITICAL AND “TRAGITAL” NARRATION OF *THE MAHABHARATA*.

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Abstract

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Reading and interpreting literary texts breathes life to the quiet pages once again. Each time a reader attempts to extend the narrative of the text beyond its boundary, it becomes a performative act. At every phase of this process the original text gets transformed, accompanied by the creativity and knowledge of the new interpreter, substantiated by his/her instinctive and acquired talent in the practice. The significance of the avenue called technology is finding new chronicling in the history with each passing day. Fascinatingly technology has evolved even faster than man giving the latter new boulevards to create and recreate art.

In a postmodern picture the idea of submitting to textbooks is uncommon, except to a traditional group who have a real literary zeal. Culture has successfully progressed to relocate the attention of its audience from papers to screens with the overarching presence of media in the existing scene. Globalization has made the material on the screen more glamorous and ahead-of-times than that which found on paper. The best example to testify this would be to count the number of camera images of classroom notes or the screenshots on various interests on smartphones. The task of the new writer doesn’t finish with proving his/her resource in language and preserving knowledge. It turns out to be challenge of the writer to express his/her viewpoint while adapting to the needs and interests of the contemporary audience. Twitterfiction is one such challenge and a platform to experiment with tastes, interests and time.

Catherine Belsey in “The Work of Reading,” analyses the responsibility of the new reader influenced by poststructuralism, psychoanalysis and deconstruction. In her work, ‘Critical Practice’, she examines the relationship between readers and texts; humans and language, and writing and cultural politics. “Reading in order to produce the text as a newly intelligible plural object is the work of criticism” (Belsey 87). Then the objective of the reader/critic is to delve into the unconscious of the text to seek “not the unity of the work, but the multiplicity and diversity of its possible meanings, its incompleteness, the omissions which it displays but cannot describe, and above all its contradictions” (89). According to Roland Barthes, the narrative is “simply there, like life itself.” The purpose of narrative is not just to entertain, but to educate and reform. Barthes works focussed on the ideologies and the politics of representation and identifying, “what-goes-without-saying”. With the development of poststructuralist theories the role of the reader becomes essential as “a text’s unity lies not in its origin but in its destination” (Barthes 148).

The Mahabharata is one among the two epics of India that informs an Indian on his duties, morality, righteousness and salvation. It often becomes the starting point of many religious practices and sources for perennial spiritual

strength in Hinduism. But this epic belongs not just to India, but also to the whole world as it transcends regionalism to recite the collective idea of the human family. Believed to have originated from Vyasa, generations of gifted writers have contributed to the original text. Over the years it has become a cultural heritage that encompasses heroic characters, fateful events and valiant battles in stately expression.

Chindu Sreedharan, a professor of Journalism at Bournemouth University in England makes an attempt to narrate *The Mahabharata* to his contemporary audience. He revises the great epic in a captivating medium like Twitter to expose the literature to a tech-savvy audience, and completes within a period of four years. He later collates these long series of 140-lettered tweets into his book, *Epic Retold*. Unlike the original epic, the book shatters the very expectation of a traditional reader expecting stories of gods, demigods, demons and other supernatural themes, like MT Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*. Chindu admits Nair's influence on him as a child in the Author's Preface. The characters in Chindu's text are common men and women, and the style of narration is not ornamental and ivory-towered. Krishna is not a divine figure, but is a character, a little wiser than the others. He doesn't get to function any role when Draupadi is humiliated by Dushasana, while Yudhistira loses her in gambling. Hidimbi, Bhima's wife is a tribal girl and not a demoness. Likewise the parentage of the Pandavas is also designed with a twist. They are not fathered by gods such as Dharma or Vayu, but by men that the readers least expect. Yudhistira is the son of Vidura, Bhima is the son of Dritarashtra, and Arjuna is the son of Drona.

Similar to Nair's *Randamoozham*, Bhima or Bhimsen is Chindu's mouthpiece. Hence it is a "metadiegetic narration" (when the story is told and taken on by one or more characters)(Thomas 48). Bhima, the second of the Pandava brothers, gives an unbiased narration of events. The book is divided into episodes 1 to 40, along with an Author's note and Acknowledgements. Each episode/chapter is titled after the main event or the character that takes importance in the episode. Episode one, "The Palace," occasions the children of Pandu along with their mother Kunti, entering the gates of Hastinapur for the first time after living years in forests. The last Episode, "The Palace of Tears", describes the unfortunate ending of things. The tweets are critical of each character while Bhima analyses each of their vice's very closely with the first person narration. Yudhistira, the eldest of the Pandavas, is portrayed as one being partly responsible for the war. Even when he speaks of righteousness and duty, he is constantly blamed for pawing everything including his family and wife in the game of dice. Chindu gives Yudhistira the designation of "The Gambler", which becomes the title of sixteenth episode in the book.

Chindu's attempt made on Twitter and his following book is also a retelling for the modern readers to identify the injustices and prejudices which were once taken for granted in the original epic. He focuses and analyses many conflicts that went overlooked previously. A few of the tweets printed in the book are enlarged in size than the others. The author meticulously draws the attention of the readers to each of them. In the chapter titled, "The New Ravana", Jayadratha of Sindhu, husband of Dussala, the Kaurava sister, attempts to kidnap Draupadi. But he is not killed on the orders of the same Yudhistira, who previously wanted to see the death of Kimeeran, a forester who insulted him to vacate the land because it was the latter's hunting ground, and Jata of the Asura clan who also attempted to kidnap Draupadi. Then Bhima thinks, "Yudhistira's notion of justice makes no sense to me. One rule for kings, another for tribals. I am speechless" (Sreedharan 153). This event makes apparent the hypocritical ideologies of the rulers who have always escaped the rules, or of the center which has always escaped the structure.

The tweets contain modern sentiments while it deals with the issues of polygamy. When Yudistira says, "our alliance will strengthen five-fold if Draupadi weds us all. Even Krishna thinks so... Have you not heard of story of Jatila? She was wedded to seven sages," (Sreedharan 66). Bhima replies, "So what? Why should we do something simply because someone did it ages ago? ... You can get Krishna to persuade everyone that polyandry is good, but not me."(66) The silences in *The Mahabharata* as an ideological text are highlighted and brought to the forefront in *Epic Retold*. It flows parallel to contemporary literary theory which is against centres, fixities and canons. And hence Chindu's text is deconstruction of a grand narrative that has laid one of the strongest foundations for Indian culture.

The subaltern characters in the story are of greater significance than many central characters. The forester, the tribal, and the woman get more significance in Chindu's narrative. At one instance, Bhima admits that Draupadi knows Yudhistira better than his own brothers. Foresters like Ghatotkacha and Kimeeran are almost equal in strength to that of the trained princes. The Mother is one of the most revered characters. A forester like Mayan possesses great knowledge in weaponry and architecture. In Vedic school, Uncle Vidura's sons did not join the Kauravas and Pandava brothers, as Vidura was Pandu's half-brother, born to a maid and hence not of royal lineage. "They are

Sudhras, lower caste”, he tells me. “They should not be allowed to sit with us kshatriyas anyway” (Sreedharan 15), says Yudhishtra to Bhima. Most of the time when the character of Karna is discussed, he is labelled as the “charioteer’s son”(36) by the superiors, instead of his name which reminds the audience of the evil hierarchies maintained by casteism that is still rooted in the Indian society even after centuries of struggle against it.

The text also refers to marriages in Indian society and highlights the practice as an alliance for power and money. “Wives become queens based on the might of their family. Wives without might are discarded” (Sreedharan 57), contemplates Bhima after Uncle Vidura sends a messenger asking the Pandavas to attend the swayamwara in the palace of King Drupada. If one of the Pandavas gained the bride’s hand, the fortune that awaited them was in the form of a very powerful ally against the Kauravas. The character or personality of the bride did not matter in front of the wealth and influence she brought from home.

The book also makes anti-war statements. “When balladeers sing of war, they sing of glory. They do not sing of its stench” (Sreedharan 222), thinks Bhima on the thirteenth day of the Kurukshetra war. Drishtadyumna, tells Bhima that “the righteous war exists only in Yudhistira’s mind.” The book also directs an accusing eye on deforestation. While Bhima reaches Indraprastha and observes the burnt landscape, Sahadeva says, ““Oh! That’s Arjuna’s doing! He and Krishna cleared the forest’s one day!”” When Bhima asks, “what about the tribes who lived there? The Nagas and the rest?” Sahadeva answers, “some agreed to move here and work with us. The others ran away when we began setting fire to the forests.” (80)

Henry Jenkins introduced the term “convergence culture” to describe a condition where “old” and “new” technologies collide in a contemporary media landscape. Here the content flows across diverse platforms. More than a technological shift, it alters the existing relationship between various genres, audience, market and technologies. It even alters the formula by which media consumers’ process and intake news and entertainment. Twitterfiction is an example of ‘networked’ narrative or distributed narrative, where the stories are fragmented, spread, and accessed at different time. It is a platform to experiment writing while sharing stories with contacts and friends on the network. The 140-character limit is an artistic challenge to write imaginatively. As for Chindu, he progresses on familiar techniques like the ‘cliffhanger’ to encourage and sustain his audience to return for more. While he tweets, he maintains his interaction with his followers, asking them for feedbacks. Hence Chindu’s narration builds upon the inquisitive nature of his followers while he uses the full potential of what the social media like Twitter provides him.

Stories told on such mediums are a challenge on the traditional assumptions on narrative which tends to believe the narrator and reader are stable entities who has the power to control the course of the story in systemized environment. Today a narrative told on social media moves forward from the concept of a single teller towards ideas such as “coproduction” and “cotellership” (Thomas 131). Even the concepts like ‘context’ becomes complicated where “context of the telling and the context of the reception of the story may be fluid” (131). Text is no longer a private affair but a collaborated event because the audience plays an important role with their active participation in the production of the text. In digital storytelling the author interacts with the readers. This transcends the notion of author-centrism and creates virtually real connection which is a remarkable characteristic that electronic media has provided till date.

In the digital era text is a volatile creation. Texts have become more flexible while catering to the interests of a larger audience. It is neither an object nor a commodity, but a process. Consumers while seeking out for new information are making new connections. The emphasis is on media convergence that is the result of a cultural shift that happened in the past decades. Internet is ‘hyperconnecting’ while keeping people informed. Technological advancements have made it possible to analyze narrative in fresh ways while exploring ideological leanings, recurring themes and patterns.

Sreenath Sreenivasan, chief digital officer of New York City, sees “a future in using technology to create art, and also using technology to preserve art, connect with art, and to be relevant in people’s lives” (Sebastian 1). The success of Chindu’s *Epic Retold* materialises in the literary and field of social media with a wider audience acquiring knowledge on the epic, *The Mahabharatha*. His narration is “tragital” (a portmanteau word uniting the words, ‘traditional’ and ‘digital’). The book is traditional, because in subject it recites the longest epic in the world literature, and digital, with respect to the medium it choose to unfold. This interconnectedness and flexibility of disciplines is an inevitable dynamic in contemporary world of networked knowledge.

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