A MODERN APPROACH TO RETELLING OF INDIAN EPICS AND MYTHICAL CHARACTERS

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ABSTRACT

Rewritings in the twentieth century, by writers which has taken a fresh approach to Indian epics and its various mythical characters while challenging established norms, have inspired readers to revisit the epics. Unlike in the Western tradition, where myths are considered unreal, in the Indian literary tradition mythologies and epics have inspired writers, to illustrate the real social situations of our country through references to such mythologies and epics. It is not only that mythical characters are evoked to illustrate reality, but even the narrative tradition of the ancient past is indispensable to contemporary works which rewrite stories of mythical characters. In the 'modern form' the incorporation of myths into literary works is of much relevance A myth may be told and retold giving way to a 'new myth' in a modern context challenging modern creativity as it seems to have become an inevitable part of Indian story-telling tradition. The mythical characters are legendary characters that at one point were believed to be real still continues to generate literary responses from research scholars and renowned writers.

Key words: Indian epic, myth, modern, narrative, retelling

I. Introduction

Rewritings in the twentieth century, by writers from India and abroad, which has taken a fresh approach to Indian epics and its various mythical characters like Draupadi, Sita, Yudhishthir, Ravana, Kunti, Karna, Bheema and others, while challenging established norms, have inspired readers to revisit the epics. In fact Indian myth has created much literary and critical interest among contemporary writers. Some examples of such rewritings are Alf Hiltebeitel *The Cult of Draupadi: Mythologies From Gingee to Kuruksetra* (1988); Shivaji Savanta's Mrityunjaya, *The Death Conqueror: The Story of Karna* (1989); Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995); Pavan K. Vasudevan M.T. Nair's *Second Turn* (1997); Rajeswari Sunder Rajan essay "The Story of Draupadi's Disrobing Meanings for Our Times" (2001); Mahasweta Devi's *After Kurukshetra: Three Stories* (2005). Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of illusions* (2008); Iravati Karve's *Yuganta* (2008) ; Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik *Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* (2012) ; Aditi Kotwal *Draupadi in High Heels* (2013); Karthika Nair's *Until The Lions: Echoes From the Mahabharata* (2015); Amish Tripathi's *Sita-Warrior of Mithila* (2017) and many more. In the

Indian cultural scenario, after all, it is undeniable that the epics and myths play a major role in determining human behavior.

II.   Epic and Myth Embedded in Society

Basically, an epic refers to a long narrative poem derived from ancient oral tradition, narrating the great deeds of legendary heroes who embody the values of a particular society. Whereas myth is an ancient story, especially concerning and explaining the early history of a group of people or about natural events and facts typically involving supernatural beings. However, the stories of epic and myth are told again and again serving to explain why something is the way it is. Bibudhendra Narayan Patnaik rightly observes about retelling, especially of the Odia poet, Sarala Das' *Mahabharata*, in the Preface of his book *Introducing Saaralaa Mahaabhaarata* (2012) that "Sarala's stories and [his] rumination on them are kind of mixed up in the presentation" (ix):

> .... when one tells another's story with some involvement, one feels almost compelled to add a bit of one's own thinking about aspects of it in some form: comments, observations, interpretations and the like. It is especially so when the story is as comprehensive and profound as Mahabharata and is also one with which one has grown up and which has become a significant part of one's cultural identity. (Patnaik ix)

Unlike in the Western tradition, where myths are considered unreal, in the Indian literary tradition mythologies and epics have inspired writers, to illustrate the real social situations of our country through references to such mythologies and epics. It is not only that mythical characters are evoked to illustrate reality, but even the narrative tradition of the ancient past is indispensable to contemporary works which rewrite stories of mythical characters. As Meenakshi Mukherjee remarks:

> To refer to … [epics] in a discussion of the modern form called the novel might at first seem like going back too far, because the novel as a genre belongs to print culture, while epics are generally traced back to oral societies . But the oral and the written, seen as two distinct narrative traditions in the West, were not such clearly distinguished categories in the Indian past, where a written text might often have been disseminated orally or an oral tale acquired a number of written versions. (601)

III.   Relevance of Myth in modern literary work

In the 'modern form' the incorporation of myths into literary works is of much relevance and is subject to connotations and denotations. People are reluctant to defy myths because they are deeply rooted in religion and culture. As Northrope Frye observes, in his article "Myth, Fiction, and Displacement" (1961): "[myth] is a conception which runs through many areas of contemporary thought: anthropology, comparative religion, sociology, and several others" (349).

A myth may be told and retold giving way to a 'new myth' in a modern context as Pankaj K. Singh and Jaidev note in their essay "Decentering a Patriarchal Myth: Bhisham Sahni's *Madhavi.*"(1999): "a new myth is likely to have enough power to counter the authority of the old … but its chances of success are low [as] …. even when it is motivated by the most honourable considerations, does not seem to have sufficient appeal" (3). Nevertheless, myth may be modified or elaborated to comprehend the obvious conception which brings together the human form and the natural content in myth. Mythologies tend to outline an entire universe in which the gods represent the whole of nature in humanized form, and at the same time, show in perspective the origin of societies, the destiny of human beings in such societies, the limits of their powers, and the extension of their hopes and desires.

In fact, myths provide outlines and circumference of a universe which is narrated verbally. These outlines are later occupied by literature in order "to recast renovate myths so that they would not be out of step with our changing realities" (Singh and Jaidev 3). Literature is more flexible than myth, and fills up this verbal universe more completely. A poet or novelist may work in areas of human life, apparently within gigantic story-

out-lines of mythology. As in all cultures mythology merges into, and with, literature. As Frye, in explaining the concept and importance of myth, remarks, "myth is and has always been an integral element of literature, the interest of poets in myth and mythology having been remarkable and constant since Homer's time" (349). Further, Meenakshi Mukherjee observes that the terminological use of 'epic' becomes crucial in "literary discussion across… culture[s]" (601). She notes that "[e]pic in the context of India means neither "primary epics" like the Iliad or the Odyssey, nor the secondary variety written by Virgil or Milton" (601). She notes that two Indian epics Ramayan and Mahabharata, have "no exact synonym for epic in Sanskrit" (601) and equates the Indian epic to "itihas" or history:

> [i]n English, both are referred to as epic, but the category for the Ramayana in Sanskrit is kavya (narrative in verse) or mahakavya (long narrative in verse); for *the* Mahabharata, it is itihasa ("thus it happened"- what is now called history) or itihasa-purana, which is one of the many subdivisions of the generic term purana (meaning stories of the gods). (601)

IV.   Modern consciousness of Indian Epic and Mythical Characters

Inspite of the ambiguous terminology of epic in Sanskrit, the 'episodes' and characters of these two Indian epics still have 'global influences' challenging modern creativity. Mukherjee even points out that its rewritings in different Indian languages is not to be misunderstood as 'translations'. Rather she suggests that epics pose 'creative challenge' reviving 'contemporary consciousnesses. She notes:

> [o]ver the centuries most major languages of India have rewritten (it is important to remember that these are not translations) the Ramayana and the Mahabharata to fit their regional ethos and available metrical repertoire. Even to the novelists of our time, exposed as they are to global influences, reinterpretations of episodes from these epics continue to be a creative challenge. Thus the epics in India do not belong to the past alone- they are also part of the contemporary consciousness …. (603)

Similarly, Patnaik too agrees that retelling is not translation as "no retelling by a creative storyteller is a carbon copy of the original" (1). He continues to argue that Sarala's *Mahabharata* is not the translation of Vyasa's Mahabharata, rather Sarala has "re-conceptualized Mahabharata and composed a truly wonderful story" (1). Further he notes that "[o]ne who is familiar with at least the main episodes of Vyasa Mahabharata would have a better understanding of Sarala's retelling" (ix). The critic, Rene Girard, in his essay "Violence and Representation in the Mythical Text" (1977) also refers to the "trustworthiness" of mythical representations which have 'real referent[s]'. He explains:

> …. [u]ntil now we have been very careful to treat the mythical representations as purely representations, but their analysis has logically led us to the hypothesis that some of them at least must have a real referent, as the linguist would say. In order to arrive at a truly concrete and efficient theory of the myth we must face the possibility that some of its representations are trustworthy, at least in principle …. (934)

V.   Trustworthiness of Epics and its Characters

In the context of India, it is but impossible not to believe in the "trustworthiness" of the epics, Ramayana or Mahabharata, or their representation of various characters. Accordingly, in novels like Pratibha Ray's *Yajnaseni* (1995) and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* (2008) , shows dependence upon the "trustworthiness" of Draupadi as a mythical character in their rewritings of her story. In both the retellings the epic Mahabharata becomes a primary concern as the epic provides the background in which the events in their stories take place weaving a tale of modern revolution. There are examples of other Indian writers too, who, like Iravati Karve, Rajeswari Sundar Rajan, Sally J Sutherland, Mahasweta Devi have deviated from a traditional writing in order to adopt a 'new writing' imbued with 'new thinking' and 'new techniques'. Rewritings of myths by "postmodernist novelists" have also exposed the "reigning anarchy of the contemporary socio-political scenario" as postulated in A.S.Rao's book, *Myth and History in Contemporary Indian Novel in English:*

> The departure from the conventional modes of writing and functioning paves the way for new thinking and leads to the new writing absorbing interest and abiding utility. The new thinking needs new techniques, varied interpretative strategies. Human nature has a prodigious resilence. Any imbalance leads to a sense of despair, desolation and frustration. A sense of uncertainty and futility prevails. The thirst for a life giving sap prompts the postmodernist novelists to make a gigantic attempt at depicting the reigning anarchy of the contemporary socio-political scenario in pictures grotesque and incorrigible. (4)

J.Hillis Miller's definition of "narration" as "natural ... universal, and ... easily mastered" fits the narrative of the Mahabharata (66). As narrative references to this epic continue, it seems to have become an inevitable part of Indian story-telling tradition. Also the mythical characters are legendary characters that at one point were believed to be real. There are examples from within and outside India of creation myths, fall and flood myths metamorphosis and dying-god myths, and apocalyptic myths. And while, myths themselves are seldom historical, they seem to provide a continuing form of tradition. However, these myths, in their continuing importance to cultures of societies, establish and impose certain ideologies and value systems upon members of a community.

In the spirit of what Beer points out, that "[w]e can nudge and de-stabilise the word 'representation' in another way" and that "it can mean also re-presenting: making past writing a part of our present, making present what is absent" (67), Yet, the representation of Indian epic and mythical characters is not an act of 'repetition'. As Weimann remarks about rewriting:

> …. It is enough to make this connection (and to define the act of representation as an act of intellectual production, not repetition) in order to realize that between the process and the product of representation there can never be a status of absolute congruity, simultaneity, and completeness. The act of representing … is radically different from what it results in, the represented. (185)

VI.   Conclusion

Retelling of Indian epics and mythical characters have gained popularity out of literary circulation and story-telling that still continues to generate literary responses from research scholars and renowned writers from both India and abroad. Although myth is the outcome of past already embedded into the mindset of the people yet the changing socio-cultural scenarios have added new dimensions to myth. Modern thinking individuals, intellectuals and writers have challenged ideologies established by myths, and thrown new light on readings of epics and mythical characters that propagate such myths. They have brought myth to the forefront by contesting as well as redefining prevalent norms.

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