

“Indian Epics re-visited: A Study of Select Indian Novels”

Dr. Thammaiah. R. B.

Head of the Department

Department of English

Padmashree Institute of Management and Science,

Bangalore.

&

Dr. Indhu M. Eapen

Assistant Professor,

Government First Grade College, Mulbagal, Kolar District – 563131.

Abstract

The Indian mind is always obsessed with the epics of their land. The Indian writers try to identify the happenings of the present with those told in the two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In fact, they justify the actions of the present with those found in the epics. John Vickery's assumption that myth is a "matrix out of which literature emerges both historically and psychologically" (Vickery 1966, ix) is being considered here in this paper. The matrix is being identified to have taken two different forms and it will be discussed with reference to select Indian novels in English. Firstly, as a complete re-narration of the classical epic, with the author naming his chosen mythological characters and settings according to the original ones and taking the postcolonial stance of questioning the role of the colonized or marginalized. In the second type, we have a juxtaposition of sections narrating a myth and the others concerned with the contemporary world wherein a part of the mythology is dealt with explicitly and it is given a contemporary setting. The authors have dramatized the novels in such a way so as to make the past a vital part of the present. However, a pattern could be seen to emerge. Several attitudes on the part of the writers can be discerned. The main contention is that there has been an attempt to re-write the past, especially the colonial past and deconstruct the colonial framework. Epics have largely contributed to the portrayal/interpretation of incidents in the novels; the postcolonial condition, an additional support in the process of interpretation. In the process, the primary characters of the epics are seen in a new light. The repressed characters in the myths have also been given a voice.

Key Words: Myth, Epics, Matrix, Re-narration, Postcolonial, Repressed characters.

The Indian mind is always obsessed with the epics of their land. The Indian writers try to identify the happenings of the present with those told in the two great epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*. In fact, they justify the actions of the present with those found in the epics.

John Vickery's assumption that myth is a "matrix out of which literature emerges both historically and psychologically" (Vickery 1966, ix) is being considered here in this paper. The matrix is being identified to have taken two different forms and it will be discussed with reference to select Indian novels in English.

Firstly, as a complete re-narration of the classical epic, with the author naming his chosen mythological characters and settings according to the original ones and taking the postcolonial stance of questioning the role of the colonized or marginalized. This is found in M.T.Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* wherein the author takes the character of Bhima from the *Mahabharata* and gives him a voice. Bhima is the colonized here, colonized by the circumstances and the people around him. He has his own standpoint for everything, but nobody listens to him. However, the epic does not reveal that Bhima had his own sensibility. The sensibility is provided by the author in the novel.

In the second type, we have a juxtaposition of sections narrating a myth and the others concerned with the contemporary world wherein a part of the mythology is dealt with explicitly and it is given a contemporary setting. Here, both the myth and the postcolonial complement each other. This is evident in Krithika's *Vasaveswaram*, Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*, Sethu's *Pandavapuram*, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. In Krithika's *Vasaveswaram*, the myth of Vasava is used to portray the incidents that happen in an ordinary village named after Vasava—Vasaveswaram. The colonizer-colonised attitude can be found in the relationship between Rohini, Chandrasekhara Iyer and Picchandi. In Sunil Gangopadhyay's *Arjun*, the myth is taken from the *Mahabharata* and the story is that of a village in Bengal that had to deal with the problems of the India-Pakistan partition. Sethu's *Pandavapuram* again takes myth from the *Mahabharata* and narrates a story of a colonized woman, Devi, who is colonized by the patriarchal society. Devi assumes the role of a Goddess to protect womankind. All her life she had yearned for freedom and she finally encounters it personified in men around her and thus the flights of fantasy between the real world and the imagined. Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* and Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*, both take several instances from the myths to portray the political condition of India. Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night* also uses the myth to portray the condition of Devi, the protagonist of the novel.

However, in all the novels, the authors have consciously used epic situations and characters to portray a modern context. The authors have dramatized the novels in such a way so as to make the past a vital part of the present. However, a pattern could be seen to emerge.

One such pattern is the order of increasing complexity and sophistication in their use of myth. For instance, in *Vasaveswaram*, the myth functions in the form of religious discourses narrated by the harikathaman Subrahmanya Sastrigal. The story revolves around these harikathas, the characters either take refuge in

them or revolt against them. In *The Thousand Faces of Night*, the protagonist Devi takes refuge in the myths which help her redefine her identity. Two women who help Devi in her quest for identity by connecting to the mythical stories are Devi's grandmother and Mayamma. In *Pandavapuram*, the protagonist Devi relies entirely on the myth of Draupadi to justify the associations with her paramours. This novel is different from the other novels due to the psychological touch given to it by the novelist. Devi, due to her troubled past, vows to protect her community from the hands of the male dominated society and to do this, she dons the garb of a Goddess. While Githa Hariharan's Devi relates herself to the characters of Damayanti (while choosing Mahesh as her husband similar to Damayanti choosing Nala in a *swayamwara*), Gandhari (in the case of her mother sacrificing her heart's desire to play the veena which is similar to Gandhari's ultimate sacrifice to blindfold herself after learning that she has been married to a blind person), Amba (with respect to her cousin Uma's marriage) and Ganga, Sethu's Devi is preoccupied with Draupadi. However, both the protagonists want to break the ideology of the male paradigm and they are successful too. In the novel *Arjun*, the protagonist Arjun Raychoudhury is in a similar plight as that of Arjuna in the *Mahabharata*. There is a direct reference to the myth in terms of the name as well as the circumstances leading to the incidents in the novel. There is a political situation too that asserts the character's predicament that gets him closer to the myth. But this is not the case with M.T.Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*, wherein the Bhima myth is explored to its fullest. Bhima, the not-so important character in the *Mahabharata* in terms of his emotions (but very important for his strength), is presented as the most sensible of all the Pandavas in this novel. He expresses strong disapproval of several incidents and deeds that happened in the *Mahabharata*. The novelist redefines Bhima's character in such a way that if Bhima had had the first turn, *Mahabharata* would have been much different from what it is. However, in Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, the protagonist's quest for identity is similar to India's quest for identity and to fulfill both, the novelist makes use of the epics both directly and indirectly. But Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* is the most ingenious narration of events in the form of a parallel between the Indian political condition and the *Mahabharata*. Tharoor has cleverly satirized India's political history that includes the partition and the independence movements and the Indian democracy by a deliberate use of the mythical narratives from the epic. What Tharoor has done, in fact, is designing a third narrative by fusing the mythical and historical narratives; in the process demythicizing the myth and mythicizing history.

Draupadi's character has seen different shades of portrayal. For instance, in *Randamoozham*, Draupadi is loved and adored by Bhima and though he has to wait for his second turn to bestow his affection on her, he does it with utmost care. The novelist also mentions the fact that whenever Draupadi expressed her desire to acquire something, Bhima would undergo any ordeal to fulfill it for her. Here, Draupadi is portrayed as one who is of extreme importance in Bhima's life. But in Sethu's *Pandavapuram*, Draupadi is shown as Panchali, the wife of five husbands and the protagonist taking refuge in this myth to justify her actions. While in *The Great Indian Novel*, Draupadi is a symbolic and allegorical character rather than a flesh-and-blood one. She is shown as the product of the union of India and the West in terms of boundaries

and that of Jawaharlal Nehru and Edwina Mountbatten in terms of people, and she is named Draupadi Mokraasi. Her disrobing in the court by Dusshasana finds a parallel in the dusshasan (misrule) of Indira Gandhi during the Emergency.

Several attitudes on the part of the writers can be discerned. One among them is the attitude of reverence, which is found in *Vasaveswaram* in terms of societal issues. In *Vasaveswaram*, the *harikathas* are the means for the myths to be narrated to the people of Vasaveswaram. The three *harikathas* are a reflection of the incidents that the villagers experience in their village. The reverence to God is found here too which is being exploited for the sake of the improvement of the village and its values or even to find solutions to the various problems faced by the villagers. Thus, the sanctity of the myth itself is kept inviolate. The characters are evaluated against the ideal of the mythical figures and found wanting here.

Another attitude is one of interrogation, which is found in M.T.Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and Githa Hariharan's *The Thousand Faces of Night*. In *Randamoozham*, Bhima interrogates certain decisions taken by his own brothers and also Kunti which is not found in the epic. His sensibility is that of a mature individual who evaluates the pros and cons of the situation in detail before taking a decision. He also questions the morality of the society of his time especially in the case of sharing Draupadi and the court scene when Draupadi was dragged by his cousin and all her husbands looked on helplessly at the happening. Bhima, though he wanted to help Draupadi, could not do so because he did not have the permission of his elder brother. We could say Nair evaluates the mythical characters by modern yardsticks, and finds them deficient. Saleem in Rushdie's novel interrogates the burden of history upon him, even as his origins and life have a Karna-like mystery. This burden is like a cross that he carries on his shoulders and it identifies itself with all the later incidents in his life. Thus, Saleem is both a victim and the executor of national history. Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* interrogates the traditional concept of *dharma*—should it be linked to religion only or should it be according to the social values and standards? With obvious narrations from the epic as well as the national history, Tharoor concludes that *dharma* is relative. Nevertheless, in Hariharan's novel, the male-dominated society that victimizes the women is questioned. But the protagonist and her mother outgrow their hapless situation and seek a solution in the homecoming and the acceptance of the musical instrument, the veena, respectively.

There are similarities in *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* both of which have the form of oral narrative. While Saleem is the mouthpiece for the author in *Midnight's Children*, V.V. is the oral narrator in *The Great Indian Novel*. While Saleem claims that he has so many stories to be told, V.V. exclaims that there is no end to the stories in India. Both the narrators try to present their stories mixing their personal events with the political events of their country. This means of oral narrative in a way helps to de-centre the colonial contours of India and glorify the Indian systems, religious and political, that is, moralistic and patriotic.

Another similarity in the two novels is that they are related to the political/historical condition of India. Both the novels use the epics to portray the national history. *Midnight's Children* and *The Great Indian Novel* alternate between myth and reality in the narration of events. Certain incidents that were landmarks in the political history of India find a mention in the two novels—the Jallianwalabagh massacre, the partition, wars with China, Pakistan and Bangladesh, Emergency etc. In fact, Tharoor acknowledges his reading of the Rushdie text in his novel in an ingenious manner, “Children being born at inconvenient times of the night who would go on to label a generation and rejuvenate a literature” (Tharoor 239). He has also entitled his eighth book “Midnight’s Parents” as a parody of Rushdie’s novel. However, while in *Midnight’s Children* the story of Saleem is set as a parallel to the national events, in *The Great Indian Novel* one notices a fusion of both the myth and the political narrative. For instance, in the incident revolving around Shantanu, Tharoor says, “Years later, inexplicably, the now middle-aged king returned from a trip to the river bank with a handsome lad named Ganga Datta, announced that he was his lost son, and made him heir-apparent; and though this was a position which normally required the approval of the British Resident, it was clear that the young man possessed in abundant measure the qualities and the breeding required for the office of crown prince, and the Maharaja’s apparently eccentric nomination was never challenged” (Tharoor 21-22).

Thus, there has been an attempt to re-write the past, especially the colonial past and deconstruct the colonial framework. Epics have largely contributed to the portrayal/interpretation of incidents in the novels discussed above; the postcolonial condition, an additional support in the process of interpretation. In the process, the primary characters of the epics are seen in a new light. The repressed characters in the myths have also been given a voice in some of the novels discussed above.

Epics have a meaningful presence in Indian social life. The *harikatha*-tradition enlivens the significance of certain morals and ideals to be followed in our day-to-day life. Mythological archetypes underlie most cultural beliefs and practices and even language and idiom. They have a hold on the contemporary Indian consciousness and sensibility. The novels discussed above have myths as either an explicit or an implicit context or even basis. However, sometimes the myths are re-interpreted and re-shaped to suit the author’s sensibility, though they drive home the fact that they cannot be neglected in the contemporary Indian situation. They become an artistic method and poetic prop; an empty form to be filled with the author’s discourse. They act as a connecting link between the known and the unknown around which the entire culture exists. R.K. Narayan in his essay “English in India: The Process of Transmission” asserts:

With the impact of modern literature, we began to look at the gods, demons, sages and kings of our mythology and epics, not as some remote connections but as types and symbols, possessing psychological validity even when viewed against the contemporary background [...] (Narayan 206)

According to Nila Shah, the *Mahabharata* has been a source of imagination to almost all artistic genres down the ages. It is not simply a text, but a tradition in itself (Shah 81). Therefore, it is no wonder that the Indian novelists would derive several of their ideas from the *Mahabharata*, which is a storehouse of stories and morals. The novels discussed above have taken their source of inspiration from the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*. Nila Shah further notes that the *Mahabharata* “is the content of our ‘collective consciousness’” (Shah 82). An extreme, pietistic position would maintain that the whole of India’s philosophy, religion, culture and the code of conduct is enshrined in these two epics and that there is absolutely no room for any mistake in its teachings. However, a number of writers have discovered the subtle discrepancies, gaps, silences and debatable issues in the epics. Such writers have cut across languages and genres. There are works of prose, fiction and drama that have adapted, re-told, interrogated and critiqued the ancient Hindu epics. Increasingly, *Mahabharata* and, perhaps to a lesser extent, *Ramayana* are coming to be seen not as enshrining rigid or absolute creeds or morals but as throwing up a number of crucial issues that need constant review.

Thus, for example, in Irawati Karve’s book of essays *Yuganta* (1994), the silences in the epics (both the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*) have been given a voice. The characters have been given a sensibility to understand their situations and their feelings have been recorded accordingly. As one reads the *Mahabharata*, one is hounded by several questions. These questions have been taken up in *Yuganta*. For instance, one of the significant questions taken up for study is, why Bhishma had to suffer a lot in his life despite having sacrificed his life for the sake of the other characters in the epic? Bhishma had been born a cursed one. He was the only one among the eight Vasus who had to remain on earth while all the others had escaped mortality. Bhishma, because of his extreme sacrifice, even got a boon to die when he wished, but it was his fate that he had to live to see the disgraces of his younger generation and finally die at the hands of a woman. Thus, his sacrifices have become ‘fruitless’ (Karve 8). Apart from this, Bhishma has never shown that he is a protector of womankind. His attitude towards women has always been questioned. When Draupadi was dragged to the court by Dusshasana, Bhishma could have stopped him as he was the most elderly person in the court. But, he chose to remain silent and let things take their course. In royal societies, women were treated with a lot of respect. But, Hastinapura and its royalty was different. Even in the case of Amba, Karve says, Bhishma is to be blamed. When she returned from Salva’s kingdom in search of justice, she was not provided justice by Bhishma. Kunti, being the elder son’s wife, was sent to the forest every time, either with her husband or her sons or the other members of the family. She had hardly enjoyed being the royal wife. Bhishma, being the elder and the wise, could have reverted these incidents in favour of the womankind. But that did not happen. In the chapter “Father and Son?” Karve tries to highlight the differences in the character of Bhishma and Vidura. Vidura, though a Suta, was sensible and acted according to his own conscience and never gave himself up in spite of the incidents happening in the kingdom. Bhishma, at times was silent and would be neutral in his judgements towards the Kauravas and the Pandavas. But, Vidura’s judgements were more in favour of the Pandavas. This is evident in several

episodes in the epic. For instance, when a fight was imminent between Karna and Arjuna in front of Kunti, Vidura intervened and stopped the fight for the good of both. When the Pandavas were on the thirteen years exile, Vidura provided shelter for Kunti. Vidura also argued in the assembly openly for the justice of the Pandavas and thus enabled them get a part of Hastinapura for themselves. However, Karve raises the question of the strong bond between Dharma and Vidura in her book. She suggests that there are enough evidences in the epic that can prove that Vidura and Dharma are father and son, though not very obvious for a casual reader. The first God that Kunti called for her conception was Yamadharma, and Vidura was an incarnation of the same God. Therefore, there are possibilities that she could have called Vidura, but since he belongs to the Suta caste, the whole proceeding might have been kept a secret for the good of Dharma. Also during the final journey, as Vidura was moving into oblivion, Dharma was closest to him like a son close to the father at the time of his death.

Some of the silences and gaps located by Karve have been taken up by authors like M.T. Vasudevan Nair in his novel, *Randamoozham*. This novel is a justification of the actions of Bhima, a voice is given to Bhima, which is not found in the epic. In Nair's novel, Bhima is the central character voicing his opinions to the other characters in the novel as well as to the readers. His feelings are recorded in a way that has never been done before. The whole epic is seen through the eyes of Bhima. His sensibilities have been examined to their fullest in this novel, and he has been projected as a larger-than-life hero. Thus, we understand that the Indian epics have immense possibilities for a wide range of interpretations.

To cite a prose work, the question of *Dharma* in *Mahabharata* has been taken up well by Gurcharan Das, a former corporate czar, a retired corporate CEO in his book, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* (2009). With his vast experience in the field of business, he finds a parallel between the goings-on in the corporate world and the epic *Mahabharata*. It is really very surprising that an epic like the *Mahabharata* can find echoes in several other areas, be it religion, politics or business. In this book, Das considers the fraud of Satyam Computers chairperson Mr. Ramalinga Raju to be similar to the failing of Dhritarashtra in the epic. Just as Dhritarashtra had excessive love for his sons, and would go to any lengths to provide everything for them, Raju had wanted his children to live in the lap of luxury which led him to cross the thin line from 'healthy ambition' to 'selfish greed'. Similarly, Das equates the Anil-Mukesh Ambani feud in the business world to the envy of Duryodhana towards his cousins, which led to the war. Das considers this envy as *adharma* and he claims that the epic teaches *dharma* through *adharma*. However, Das also understands that the whole of the epic revolves around *adharma*, which is in perfect accord with the *adharma* prevalent in the Indian corporate sector and governance. There is *adharma* in Dhritarashtra's court, in Duryodhana's behaviour, in Draupadi's disrobing, and in Bhishma's failure to protect/uphold righteousness during several incidents. Similarly, Das points out that corruption is the quintessence of Indian business and politics. In fact, Draupadi rightly questions *dharma* during the disrobing incident and Bhishma gives this elusive answer

As dharma is subtle, my dear, I fail

To resolve your question in the proper way. (Das 36)

In his conclusion, Das also points out the irony that prevails throughout the epic with regard to the proper meaning of *dharma*:

Despite its dark, chaotic theme and despite ironic reminders about how difficult it is to be good, the *Mahabharata* is able to snatch victory in the character of its ‘un-hero’, Yudhishthira. He teaches us that it is part of the human condition to also aspire. He shows us that it is possible for good to triumph ‘even in a time of cosmic destructiveness’, making us realize that the theme of the *Mahabharata* is not war but peace. The king ‘who weeps with all creatures’ demonstrates through his example that the epic’s refrain—‘*dharma* leads to victory’—is not merely an ironic hope. (Das 305)

Romila Thapar’s *Sakuntala—Texts, Readings, Histories* (1999) also brings out the several nuances in the primary source, the *Mahabharata* which has been retold in Kalidasa’s play written in fourth century A.D. The author points out that her intention is to explore those “unexplored dimensions of both our past and our present” (Thapar 2) by delving deep into both the narrative and the play, and examining how the different time frames project Sakuntala differently which “not only allows a historical view on the story, but also introduces a gender perspective” (Thapar 1). The author has clearly explained how the treatment of women had been different in the times of the epic as well as during the period of Kalidasa and how the social conditions can influence the re-writing of a story. Thapar has also shown the various roles played by Sakuntala: “the self-reliant woman of the *Mahabharata*, the romantic ideal of upper caste high culture in the play by Kalidasa, as the child of nature in German Romanticism, and as the ideal Hindu wife from the perspective of Indian nationalism and its perceptions of Hindu tradition” (Thapar 257). Such wide range of interpretations helps keep the epics alive and not be shelved as a dead relic of the past. However, the contemporary nature of the play is achieved at the cost of de-mythification.

Thus, epics are a highly significant part of human life and creative writers bring them to life by reworking them in their writings. The writers try to present the epics in its relation to the present condition of the society, be it political, economic or cultural. In this process, the sanctity of the epic may be lost; however, it serves the purpose of enlightening the people that they do have relevance in the society. Epics have also been constantly regenerated in different societies because they serve as an invitation to a way of life and as a model for the orientation of self development. The creative writers, by reworking the epics, ensure that they are never frozen. In fact, they were forced to respond to the ideas prevalent during their times; therefore, they ingeniously engaged epics to be located in these newer ideals and beliefs of the contemporary times, and thus epics are alive in the hands of these creative writers. It was also perceived that such interpretations of epics were crucial for growth, both for the individual and for the nation. However, human beings are so much a part of the modern mythic environment that they often fail to perceive it. Sometimes epics provide an opening and a way of seeing as well as a symbolic solution and resolving of

political impasses and sometimes epics are so vague that they can be articulated in a variety of ways. Epics are also treated as receptacles for potential communication, communication between the present and the past. Perhaps it is the quality of timelessness of the epics that helps the creative writers to re-value them in myriad ways.

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