About Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

Contact Us: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

Editorial Board: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

The Mahabharata: A Study in the Light of Modern Narratology

Garima Sharma
Research Scholar
B.P.S.M.V, Khanpur Kalan, Sonepat.

Narratology, in literary theory, is the study of narrative structure. Narratology refers to both the theory and the study of narrative and its structure and the ways that these affect our perception. It may refer to any systematic study of narrative. Now the question arises, what is narrative and what is narrative structure? Generally speaking, narrative is a story or an account of events, experience, whether true or fictitious. And narrative structure is basically about two things: the content of the story and the form that is used to tell a story. The two very common ways to describe these two parts of narrative structure are story and the plot. The term narratology is first coined by Tzvetan Todorov, French, who talks about the shifts in the focus from the surface level to the more general and structural properties of narrative.

The origins of narratology exist in structuralism and semiotics. The works of Saussure and Russian formalists prepared a ground for structuralist thought. Narratology in the strict sense of the word is usually associated with structuralism. The basic idea on which narratology is based is of a common literary language or a common pattern that operates within the text of a work. The concept of language underwent many changes from many centuries. Because of the impact of structuralism it became increasingly necessary to find the grammar of narrative structures from various angels and perspectives in the mid of 20th century. The development of this theory and the related terminology gained pace in the mid 20th century. Its theoretical lineage is traceable to Aristotle's poetics. But modern narratology is agreed to have begin with Russian formalists particularly Vladimir prop. The most influential contribution from narratological aspect was the formalist distinction of fabula and sujet given by tomasvesky.

Past several decades have seen an explosive interest in narrative. Going back to the ancient Indian narrative, the system falls under the broad classification of *itihasas* and *puranas* .In a wider perspective the ancient epics, myths, legends, fables and the variety of poetry can be brought under the head of narratives, still *puranas* and *itihaasas* constitute a genre of their own. They tend to expand beyond the traditional definitions.

After having a brief look over the narrative system of India, we find that some precise and effective analytical device is missing. Every branch of knowledge whether be it literature or architecture or philosophy, claims to have a science of their own. But a science of narration is missing. It is wrong to think that poets like kalidasa wrote poetry only after mastering the science of poetry. However, no Acharya has taken points from the science of narration. It would have been much easier, if there was one. Do our puranas and itihaasas contain any clue which takes us to the definite conclusion about the science of narration? A hard research is required with the

available text to get an idea of narrative style. Only dissimilarities can be expected when two different cultural streams are put face to face, especially when the areas of knowledge and literature are to be analyzed. The reason behind this is that the unidentifiable base of both is 'culture' which has not yet a clear cut definition. A modern investigator of an ancient text finds difficulty in reading the original unspoilt pattern of that culture which he wants to explore. Language is the most effective tool that can help him to analyze.

I will be taking up *The Mahabharta* as the basic text to analyze the modern narrative style. Mahabharata can be analyzed in innumerable ways yet its narrative is the chief concern. The epic sprung up from the heart of sage vyasa melting with compassion towards the ignorant. The very opening chapter of this epic gives enough evidence of its versatility.

Everything is mentioned here in a perfect order.

Whatever is depicted here can be seen elsewhere,

And whatever is not depicted here cannot be found anywhere.

At first the multidimensional nature of the epic may cause difficulty in viewing it as a coherent well constructed narrative. But when a balanced vision is developed we find the unity beneath these complexities. In the midst of all these diversities and incongruities, a selective mind can identify the repository of all epistemological discipline and the totality of ancient Indian narrative system. The varied readings and approaches by several critics are not contradictory but are different path of the same aim. The multi dimensional development of the epic opens to tremendous possibilities of different interpretations. Modern narratology can offer many approaches for the analysis of *Mahabharata* but the main focus of discussion is the sage vyasa's multi faceted narratological identity. The multiplicity of stand points gets more and more multiplied when it comes to a more complicated and gigantic narrative like *Mahabharata*. The prime task is to release *Mahabharata* from the apparent confusion of its individual message and to bring it into a common platform, which it shares with other narratives.

It has to be accepted that the narration of puranas and itihaasas is complex and not so straightforward. Though the personality of the narrator is fixed, it spreads out to a variety of listeners and narrators. It expands at many levels by shifting the narrator frequently. In *Mahabharata* the narration shifts from sauti (ugrsarva is generally referred to as sauti), to vaisampayan to sanjay and so on. Normally, the narration proceeds with the question raised by the listener. The narrator may be divinely inspired, free of desires and compassionate towards the distressed. Vyasa is not the ordinary one but one blessed with the rarest faculty of rishitva and munitva, having divine perception.

Mahabharata is the most complex and extensive narrative, perhaps in the world. Now, can *Mahabharata* come under narratological possibility of an expansion of a verb'? The ethical and didactic background points to the fact that yes it is an expansion of a verb. Now the possibilities

of the narratological propositions of 'tense', 'mood', and 'voice' are to be analyzed. Since modern narratology offers strict principles of analysis of tense, one should be very careful here. The first caution as Genette says is that the temporality of written narrative is conditional, since the time needed for 'consuming' it. But here is a difficult problem that there is no proper reading time for *Mahabharata*. The narrative sequence of the epic is pulled back to the past, pushed forward to the future and stretched through the present. The concept of time in ancient Indian narratives is extremely deceptive. Because they don't talk about a day or a month or a year but they talks about 'yugas'. For example, the viratparva of *Mahabharata*, which spans around one year and when it finds its discourse it spread over seventy two chapters. But the war of just eighteen days is prolonged over four parvas, Bhishma, Drone, karna, satya and nearly 460 chapters in its discussion. So a comprehensive conception of the actual time of the narrated events and the time of narration is impossible. So, a reader especially of a classical narrative like *Mahabharata* is left with no other option than to make his own 'pseudo-temporality'.

Coming up to the next narratological category i.e. Mood. It generally referred as the modalities of the narrative representation. It has to be clearly understood what exactly mood means in the context of modern narratology. The variations brought up by the narrator in the narrative representation and their operative methods come under the category of Mood. A narrator can tell less or tell more, from one point of view or from another. Story can be presented through different perspectives of different characters. First situation is the traditional puranic narration, where sauti, the puranic narrator narrates story to the sages. This is termed as the extra-diegetic narrative level. Sage vyasa is the real author-narrator of the epic and just because he wants to adhere to the norms of puranic narration, he has introduced the first narrator sauti. Another possibility is the question of a narrative without narrator. Genette speaks of and analyses the possibility as shown by Ann Benfield in her 'unspeakable sentences'. In such a state, characters and events appear to speak or show themselves 'not uttered by anyone'. Genette rejects this possibility because a narrative discourse should be with a 'narrator and narratee'. It is an act of communication. The possibility of characters and events of *Mahabharata* showing or telling themselves cannot be thought of. Narrating without a narrator is a pure illusion.

Some of genet's observations are quite significant as far as the situations of *Mahabharata* are concerned. He says that an analyses or a simple description cannot differentiate a complex narrating situation. He confesses that critical discourse cannot say everything at once. In *Mahabharata*, the birth of Drona, his friendship with Drupada, their enmity, Drona's defeating Drupada in the form of 'gurudakshina' by the Pandavas etc…have been narrated to janamajaya by vaisampayana. The same story content can also be found in Adiparva where the narrator is a Brahmin, who is a guest in the house where Pandavas stay in ekacakra village. He narrates this story to Pandavas without recognizing them. The narrator's non-recognition of his narrates plays a vital role in the differentiation of narrating situation. The narratological principal could be an eye opener to those who approach lightly to the complex narratives like *Mahabharata*. The play of divergence and convergence in narrating situations is ample in *Mahabharata*.

Genette's observation is that every narrative is explicitly not in the first person. This means that every moment the narrator may use the pronoun 'I' to designate himself. But in *Mahabharata* the case is different. When 'aham' or a verb in first person singular under the head occurs, it is an imitation of vyasa's words by some another narrator. Vyasa prefers to be hidden among the plurality of narrators' and keeps his voice 'unidentified'.

The next possibility proposed by genet need to be deciphered carefully. First is that the reader perceives that the author speaks manifestly about himself, but pretends to be speaking about someone else. And the second is that the author manifestly speaks about himself, but pretends that someone else is speaking about him. Applied to the *Mahabharata*, the first case is that vyasa is speaking about himself, but pretends to be speaking about Pandavas and Kauravas. Here he cannot be differentiated from sauti or vaisampayana or sanjay. The second case is that vyasa speaks about himself but pretends to be sauti or vaisampayan or sanjay speaking about him. First proposition is cancelled because vyasa never appears before the reader as an independent narrator. There is a strong inclination to accept the second. Vyasa is certainly not a first person narrator, since his 'I' comes through someone else's consciousness. As proposed by genet, every narrative is a blend of the two i.e. narration and the description. Narration in the strict sense is the verbal representation of the actions and the events. No narration is possible without description.

Mahabharata is not a simply a literary text recounting some past events, both from narratological aspect and from analysis of its own linguistic and cultural signs. Its stupenousness and comprehensiveness can be summed up thus "whatever is here can be seen anywhere and whatever is not here cannot be seen anywhere". This is general and vogue statement. Almost every narratological possibility and device envisaged by the modern narratologists found practical application in Mahabharata. The real meaning of Mahabharata as a narrative does not lie in the number of main characters and their deeds alone but in how these characters and events are perceived in the perception of a perceiver. Every inch of the narrative structure of the text of the Mahabharata finds its theoretical idealization in modern narratology. Every latest trends of narratology can be seen in this classical text. The text of Mahabharata is a gold mine for those who aspire to have an analytical study of narratology. It encompasses the dimensions of time and space in entirety. From narratological angle, its treasures can never be exhausted.

Works Cited:

Abbott, H. Porter. 2002. ABhargava, Rajul and Shubhshree. *Of Narratives, Narrators*. Jaipur and New Delhi: Rawat, 2004. Shok, A.V. Narrative: A Students Companion. Chennai: T.R. Publication, 2000.

Bal, Mieke. Narratology: *Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Paperbound ed. Toronto: U of Toronto P, 1988.

Barthes, Roland. *"Introduction to the Structural Analysis of Narratives." Image Music Text*. Barthes. London: Fontana, 1 977. 79- 124.

Brink, Andre. *"Languages of the Novel." Introduction*. The Novel: Language and Narrative Form - Cervantes to Calvino. By Brink. London: Macmillan, 1998. 1 - 19.

Chibber, S.D.S. Poetic Discourse: An Introduction to Stylistic Analysis. New Delhi: Sterling, 1987.

Genette, Gerard: *Narrative Discourse*: translated by Jane E. Lewin. Basil Blackwell, oxford 1980.

Prince, Gerald. *Narratology: The Form and Functions of Narrative*. Berlin: Mouton, 1982.

The Cambridge Introduction to Narrative. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.