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A Modern Approach to Retelling of the Mahabharata: A Study of Kiran Nagarkar's *Bedtime Story*

Supriya Pant

Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Kumaun University, Nainital.

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Abstract:

Challenging established norms, writers in 20th century have taken a fresh approach to Indian epics by rewriting them. To depict real social condition with the reference of myths and epics has become a popular literary tradition among writers. Epic are not mere story, it also depicts the ancient culture and preaches valuable ethics to mankind. Hence revisiting an epic revitalizes the mankind to lead their life with ethics. Writers such as Amish Tripathi, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattanaik, Kavita Kane, Kiran Nagarkar and many others have restored the past through their retellings. The present study focuses on the retelling of Indian myth with special reference to the retelling of the revered epic Mahabharata, done by Kiran Nagarkar in his play *Bedtime story* emphasizing its' relevance in modern times.

Keywords: Epics, Retelling, Mahabharata, Myth, Kiran Nagarkar, Bedtime Story.

Throughout the world, a major part of the literature has been formed out of myths. As Northrop Frye, in explaining the concept and importance of myth in his article "Myth, fiction and Displacement" (1961) remarks;

"Myth is and always has been an integral element of literature, the interest of poets in myth and mythology having been remarkable and constant since Homer's time" (349)

Kiran Nagarkar's *Bedtime story* also belongs to a fine tradition of subversive retelling of the epic. Nagarkar uses the epic Mahabharata as its base story and reinterprets many of its wonderful stories and characters. It is a play of endurance, class, society change and battle in one's mind, heart and soul. It has been written with the notion of justice, fair-play, equality and

humanity. Draupadi, Karna, Eklavya, Arjun and even Krishna are reframed through the lenses of caste, gender and human frailty.

Generally, a bedtime story is told to someone, especially to a child in order to make him calm and sleep. The story of the Mahabharata, an ancient and revered epic of the Hindus, is a popular bed time story for children but Nagarkar's play *Bedtime story* which is based on this very famous epic, doesn't serve this purpose. Instead of making oneself calm it shakes the audiences' conscience and agitates them because of its subject. Nagarkar's introduction of *Bedtime Story* hopes it would force people to wake up and think about the social problems and their responsibility in making the world as worth living place. In its' introduction Nargarkar says, " ...I chose to use stories from Mahabharata as a medium to drive home my point about the malaise from which most of us suffer; apathy" (Nagarkar, 4)

Nagarkar has written it during the time of emergency in India, called for by the contemporary Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. The contemporaneous global events like Cuban crisis, the Vietnam War and the state emergency in India awakened his political conscience. He felt that people are apathetic to this entire situation and they just observe acts of disheartening criminality with admirable self-restraint so he took on the subject of personal responsibility by broaching the topic of political crisis of the day.

Reinterpretation of the epic highlighting social issues

Myth or a collection of tales compiled as an epic not only fascinate the readers, it is also a source of inspiration for writers all over the world. In Indian Literature, the two major epics Ramayana and Mahabharata has always been a source for the writers. They not only interpret the old myths but also challenge the deep rooted narrative of readers' consciousness. The creative minded writers of modern era reframe the basic myth to address the contemporary issues. These epics are no more only the product of the past rather they have a great impact on modern society too. The new works based on these epics are not only the translations of the old instead they have become a part of the contemporary consciousness. Meenakshi Mukherjee in her book 'Epic and Novel in India' points out;

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

Bedtime story is an experimental play where Nagarkar encourages his reader to question accepted traditions and mind sets. He works as a scathing critique of India’s caste system. Every Indian reader is familiar with the famous episode of ‘guru dakshina’ held between Eklavya, the tribal student and Dronacharya, the reverend guru. Eklavya practiced archery before the guru’s earthen image so he is demanded to part with his right thumb as gurudakshina by Dronacharya just to ensure that the tribal archer Eklavya doesn’t surpass his high caste Kshatriya prince Arjun and Arjun can retain his position as finest archer in the world.

On the basis of the great epic, Eklavya, the tribal or we can say the lower caste student is expected to surrender in the guru’s fiat but Nagarkar questions this narrative and gives it a new ending.

In the play ‘bedtime story ‘ at his guru’s demand, Eklavya bends down , picks up a little earth, spits in it, moulds it into the shape of a thumb , places it on a leaf , goes down on his knees and offers it to Dronacharya in cupped hand and says “like guru ,like gift” .

Like Eklavya, Karna also faces humiliation because his real parentage was unknown and he was considered a suta or ‘low born’. Even Draupadi doesn’t allow him to participate in her swayamwar. When Karna introduces himself as the future king of Angadesh, Draupadi remarks; “By birth you are the son of a charioteer. A borrowed kingdom does not give you the right to compete for my hand. Assembled here today are the kings and princes of a hundred countries. If you do not wish to be humiliated before them, I’d advise you to go and hide behind your benefactors.” (Nagarkar, 35)

Nagarkar brings misogyny of the epic to the surface through her characters Draupadi and Gandhari. He rewrites the character of Draupadi, the heroine of the Mahabharata. After the

swayamwar with Arjun when she reaches at Pandava's place, she is divided among all five brothers because of the misunderstanding of their mother Kunti. She questions their decision and rebukes them.

"You have all gone stark, raving mad. You are going to share me just because Mummy said so?" (ibid, 38)

Nagarkar questions at the hypocrisy of the Pandavas, especially at Yudhistira, who is known as Dharamraj. When he agrees to obey his mother's command, Draupadi comments;

"---Your name is Dharma, isn't it? The guardian of truth and dharma? You are supposed to be the most truthful of all men. Then tell your brother that you don't have a ghost of a right over his wife" (ibid, 39)

The Draupadi of the play is revolting and very harsh in her language. At utter disappointment.

She curses the Pandavas which we can't expect from mythical Draupadi.

"...Listen to me, God, wherever you are. I lay my curse on Pandu's progeny. May the nectar of success always turn to poison at their lips. May Kunti's son be snatched away from her the way she has snatched my husband away from me." (ibid, 39)

Later, when Sushasan tries to disrobe her and Pandavas fail in protecting her she chided them and says 'gutless', which is very insulting for the mythical Pandavas who have larger –than – life persona associated with them. She not only reprimands her husband but also questions at the existence of god when Krishna made delay in rescuing her during disrobing act done by Kauravas.

"What sort of god are you that needs calling?" (ibid, 72)

Nagarkar has also changed the name of Duryoodhan and Dushashan to Suyodhan and Sushyashan.

In the play, most of the characters do not stand close to their mythical status. When Arjun wins the contest of swayamwar he says to Draupadi that she can still marry the Man of her

choice and she doesn't have to marry him just because his arrow hit the target. At this Draupadi replies-

“...I am yours, Arjun, only yours. If somebody else's arrow had hit the target, I swear to you, Arjun, I would have stolen out of my husband's bed and lost my virginity to you.” (ibid, 35)

In the battleground of Kurukshetra the sound of bhangra and ghazals of Pakistani Singer Malikh Pukhraj Begum can be heard coming from the tents of Aswasthama and Suyodhan respectively.

The technique of anachronism has also been used to make it more contemporary. The scenes set in ancient times have references to film festivals, cakes, chocolates and aero planes. Suyodhan directs Sumukh to bring Arjun in his father's 'Boeing 747' and in a conversation with Arjun, Dronacharya mentions 'the fission bomb'. In the game of dice Suyodhan stakes 'The CIA files, nuclear submarines, collection of Chinese Ming jade, the formula for the deadliest and latest in Biological warfare, so on and so forth.

Structure of the play and its modern relevance

The whole play is divided into four acts. In each act a scene of Mahabharata is juxtaposed against its modern-day counterpart exposing the hypocrisies of ancient and modern day society. The play starts with grandmother's narration of the Mahabharata to her grandchildren. The scene where Dronacharya discriminates between Arjun, the kshatriya student and Eklavya, the tribal student and denied Eklavya to teach him because of his caste, is juxtaposed against the next scene where Eklavya, a mahar student tries to save his upper class friend Arjun from the bloodthirsty family of Draupadi with whom he has been sleeping on the sly. Arjun escapes from the scene and it is Eklavya who got caught and beaten by Draupadi's family. Draupadi's father abuses him thus-

“...First it was that do-gooder Mahatma Gandhi who filled their heads with ideas. Then came our spineless government, reserving all the best jobs for them. They're Mahars when it suits them. Otherwise they're Neo-Buddhists. They're getting too smart by half, the bastards.” (ibid, 25)

Nagarkar focusses on the Dalit's condition and caste system and not only exposes the problems of the society but also hopes that the things will get change and we'll have a bright

future, free from any kind of discrimination where everyone'll have an equal share on the earth. In a conversation Eklavya addresses Drona and Arjun saying-

“You've won this round but there will be another. The sun will go into a sudden eclipse. In the premature twilight the distinction between reality and illusion will become blurred. The sky will change. Circumstances will change. And you will not even remember that we had met before. Honored Guru, I prostrate myself before you, but from a distance. Think Kindly of your student.”(ibid, 20)

In the second act, the scene of Draupadi's swayamwar and her encounter with Kunti and her five sons has a parallel contemporary story-line where a widow named Rupali wants to run her deceased husband's family business but instead of getting help and support she is mocked by her brothers-in-law. The writer has tried to draw the attention of the reader towards the problem of gender biasness which was there in the epic and still prevailing in the contemporary society. Draupadi was never given a choice, whether it was the choice of a groom or later in the game of dice and same happens with Rupali.

The third act starts with the game of dice in which Draupadi has to pay the price for his husband's foolishness. The Kauravas try to disrobe her and her husband, instead of saving her, were only watching the show. This scene is juxtaposed against the scene of contemporary time where a young woman is raped first by the Pakistani soldiers and then by Indian soldiers, who were comrades of her husband.

Several characters are interchangeable. The same actor plays different role emphasizing the universal similarities of social injustice and moral dilemmas. The player flips into another character before the audience. Eklavya becomes Karna and Grandmother who has been telling the story, puts on a little makeup, removes her wig and becomes Draupadi and in the last scene becomes Gandhari.

Chorus- The play starts with the monologue of the chorus which is very unique in its own way. He works as a sutradhaar and makes the audience aware about the notion of the play, apathy. He talks about the importance of 'distance' in theatre and says-

“...Nobody claims that the audience is either responsible for or conniving at what happens on the stage. We on the stage are actors. Our business is to perform a play. You are the audience. You sit before us, but at a distance. And that is why our play remains a play. Distance. That’s the keyword in theatre.” (ibid, 14)

The chorus is unreliable. He assures the audience that they are in a safe atmosphere and nothing unexpected, shocking or exceptional will happen but the play ends with the extermination of the audience. He punishes them for being passive witnesses and apathetic to the crime of mankind by locking them in a gas chamber. He repeatedly says “someone has to pay the price” and here the ‘someone’ is the passive audience.

” Now take off your clothes. There’s no need to feel shame. After all, you’ve done it for thousands of years when all kinds of terrible things were happening. So why pretend now? You might as well wash away this filthy, ugly, perverted play with a chemical bath. Okay, Open the gas chamber taps. Yes, you heard me right the first time. Open the gas chamber taps. God be with you. So long.” (ibid, 96)

Conclusion

Thy myth of Mahabharata teaches the value of being compassionate, tender and generous, so does the Bedtime story. Keeping in mind some historical events like Vietnam War, Cuban Crisis, State Emergency in India, Nagarkar displays how little changes have been made in the centuries since the Mahabharata. Relevance of bedtime story is far greater today. Intolerance among people is in rapid progress, developed nations make blind use of earth’s limited resources, religious leaders, corrupt leaders, powerful industrialists are accountable to no one and no one consider over self interrogation. Nagarkar threw unshaken light into evils and was never afraid of dire consequences. The main purpose behind the retelling of the revered epic Mahabharata is to expose all the people who always remain passive towards climate change, genocide, religious wars or any brutality of the world. He manifests that we all are responsible for whatever happens- in our home, city, country, and everywhere else in the world so we have to consider over it. We can’t neglect any injustice being done in front of us. The issues raised by Nagarkar are still there. The issue of political warfare, caste, women’s rights, debate of right and wrong, all of it has not changed at all. Although Bedtime story is based on Mahabharata which has been

written centuries ago but the modern angle added to it is real, gripping and quite thought-provoking.

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