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Perusing Ramayana and Mahabharata as Modern Classics

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Abstract:

Literature plays a significant role in the lives of every individual as it acts as a partner and companion to the human race. The readers of the 21st century are in favour of picking modern and contemporary literature over the classic one's. Both overlap on the forefront as book lovers have a lot to choose from. Delving into categories of historical fiction, fantasy, folktale, realism novels, gothic and graphic novel genres and the list goes on. There is a particular surge of modern writers who are contemporising the genre of the epics and giving a modern touch to them. There has been a pioneering trend of an alternative narrative that have been revolving around lately. It is observed where a stream of authors are using comparative studies along with feminist overviews and choosing elements, storyline, language and structure of the myths and setting them into the modern times. The work of these authors are now emerging in the categories of the best-selling works of fiction of the retellings and reworkings of the two classic Indian epics- Ramayana by Valmiki and Mahabharata by Vedavyasa. This familiarity towards myth as a language and structure on its own and its usage to address various contemporary issues by re interpreting the past in view of the present using the creative inspiration from these timeless epics and displaying an array of characters and bringing out a varying attitude towards the incidents. This paper aims to explore how the two major epics Ramayana and Mahabharata play a major role in the recollection process by re-reading them

as modern classics and deciphering the myths and the vast textual paradigm displayed in the texts.

Keywords: Re- reading, Modern classics, Contemporary literature, Ramayana, Mahabharata, Timeless epics.

Introduction

Reading Classic literature is just as important in this day and age because people come from such a varied background of tradition and culture that they themselves can compare the reflections from the past and contemplate how it resembles in the present times. Bookworms currently are enjoying the changing themes and plots that are easier to relate to as the story, backdrop and characters are developed directly by incorporating different shades into them. Writers from around the globe are moving back to their roots as they have discovered that there is no unity or absolute to the conventional myths. The contemporary Indian English fiction writers or the New Age Indian authors through a mode of seamless storytelling are presenting the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata as narratives which have a combination of both fantasy and mythological fiction writings through years of meticulous research which make the readers engaged into the witty characters and lucid descriptions.

"Texts are worldly to some degree they are events, and even when they appear to deny it, they are nevertheless a part of the social world, human life, and of course the historical moments in which they are located and interpreted." (Said, 1983)

Modern fiction writers who are now voicing different ideas through these characters with the usage of various artistic approaches in order to challenge current social and cultural norms. It has become a revolutionary movement which is fueled by these new age fiction writers who have dared to go against the flow of the mainstream and have proposed unconventional ideas and themes into their writings. Pre- dominantly their mode of writings has vanguarded several ideas that can seed a huge impact both in regards of social and cultural aspects. This avant-garde style of writing uses drastic ideas to put forth reinforcing political and social changes. Now here comes the question of purpose behind writing these works of re tellings and re workings. One of the many stories that I have read or readers throughout the globe have significantly seen a change or variation in their lives. These stories have profoundly impacted or stayed with an individual. It's certain we all have read such stories or saw them, and then a penny drops, oh this is what the story was referring to! These stories play a major role in shaping the minds of the people. The two great Indian epics The Mahabharata and the

Ramayana have an absolute and intense impact on the minds of the readers and is the purpose I believe as a cog in the wheel of the contemporary fiction genre. The contemporary authors through these modern writings inspire, motivate or at the very least trigger the ideas and conversations in the minds of the current generation. Therefore, to shape ideas, to make sense of these retellings, to empower the masses and to form their own opinions and choose to bring a change in the current times. Friedrich Nietzsche who has claimed the thought and framework related to myths says, "Myth functions as the standard for measuring the 'health' of a society." (Mangion, 2003)

It is worthwhile to read and re read and further analyse these retellings as to study how these epics are perennial and they keep growing in terms of perspectives and connotations. These modern classics are not like any other traditional novels. These are the new forms of literature which establish a different kind of relationship between the author and reader. T.S Eliot in a 1944 speech to the Virgil society which was titled "What is a classic?" has admitted that 'the word classic' has several meanings in several contexts." Daniel Johnson, a British journalist and author and the founder of Standpoint magazine in a 1995 column for 'The Times' have said that the quintessential stories and characters of the classic literature have their roots in the distant past. Therefore, they have added moral statements or particular universal truths creating their own metaphysical or theological framework. Hence, re reading these epics helps us in understanding of our ancestors and traditions followed by them. They provide us with cultural beliefs, prejudices and different values which eventually help us to place and create a moral vocabulary into our intellects which consecutively empowers to expound the lives of the people and save it from social fragmentation. Numerous interpretations have been made which now the modern readers are examining and questioning. Both the epics The Ramayana and The Mahabharata open the doors for many well-known theories. The first work in this genre started with Iravati Karve's milestone work- Yuganta- End of an Epoch which is a new age analysis of the Mahabharata. Samhita Arni, who was quite ahead of her times published 'Mahabharata - A Child's View' when she was just 12 years old which was translated into many European languages and for which she won the Elsa Morante Literary award from the department of Culture of Campania, Italy. Further she wrote two more books, Sita's Ramayana and The Missing Queen. Arni says, "Retellings, are important for a culture to evolve. Each generation is different, and for a myth, story, or an epic to resonate with that generation, it must be told in a way that relates with that generation's experience, in order to touch them, and for that story to remain part of our cultural psyche." There is a plethora of books cutting across all barriers

of language which can be taken into account while reading out to this particular genre of fantasy or mythological fiction. But the larger audience of the readers have a considerable restriction towards the English language. There have also been translations done to expand the author's reach to a larger variety of readers. The stories of The Ramayana and The Mahabharata has an alluring perspective that appeals to the new age minds. Indian writings have a lot of potential and the new age modern fiction writers look at the characters and incidents from the epics in a rational manner. The focus is forming a significant relationship between the myths and the contemporary society. Keeping the tradition of storytelling alive in a new avatar catering to the tastes of modern readers. Indian readership has a lot of global reach that forms a chunk of worldwide platform. It seemed to be true when Jeffery Archer gave a promotional visit to India. Also, James Patterson, an American author collaborated with Ashwin Sanghi, the author of notable works like The Krishna Key, Rozabal Line and Chanakya's Chant. Both of them published a mystery thriller fiction titled Private India in 2014. "Feminist approaches points out the essence of one's gender in building consciousness and establishing skills and institutions. At the same time the equal designation of power and privilege." (Thayer, 2013). Another important aspect of these epics is this new trend of modern fiction writings has been challenging the male centric narratives and testing these norms by giving voices to the marginalised women characters in the epics. Just like the present-day common woman is empowered and is growing more emancipated with challenging circumstances the same is reflected through the garb of these stories unfolding through the eyes of these women characters. Previously, the women characters never discussed their rights and had a very limited role to play in the epics. The remakes of these characters in books such as The Palace of Illusions by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni in which the strong and fearless persona of Draupadi comes out. The peripheral characters of the epics brought out in the books of Kavita Kane such as character of Urmila in Sita's Sister, Karna's wife which portrays the character of Uruvi, The Fisher Queen's Dynasty narrates the story of Satyavati and Lanka's Princess which unfolds the events of The Ramayana through the eyes of Ravan's famous sister, Surpanakha. These characters are featured as the protagonists who have their own stories to tell. The unyielding nature of the character of Sita has been brought out in the books like Sita: Warrior of Mithila by Amish Tripathi and Sita: An illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana by Devdutt Pattanaik. These works act as a treasure trove of information about the epics and puranas of our vast and varied ancient Hindu culture. The Mahabharata is read as a sastra to find the deeper meaning behind its composition. The Pandavas were defined as morally right whereas the Kauravas as amoral. There is a certain type of gradation to all the characters of the epic which can be seen

throughout whether it's the cousin feud or the fight between Duryodhana and Bhima in the battlefield or the Pandavas heading towards their journey to heaven. The concepts of truthfulness, misconduct and greatness as a virtue have been discussed variedly and is interconnected throughout the epic with a constant talk about one's action (Karma) and fulfilling one's divine purpose (Dharma). These teachings are read through both the Ramayana and Mahabharata as sastras which holds substantial value both in the Vedic and modern times. One can understand and interpret meanings from the derived texts and apply in the contemporary social contexts. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata act as a major influencing factor in education, business and politics. The off the rack incidents and characters can be easily developed and re written with different alternations. One of the many popular versions of Ramayana is the 8-book series by Ashok Banker which started in 2003 with 'Prince of Ayodhya; Book One of the Ramayana' and ended in 2012 with the eighth book 'Sons of Sita' which talks about Luv and Kush. The younger generation is getting attracted towards reading these classics in form of new age fictional stories that addresses contemporary social issues and by drawing parallels between past and the present societal structure. The character of Lord Ram who is seen to possess excellent administrative skills is taken up as a suitable influence for the modern-day management concepts. The epics provide solutions which can be traced from the Ramayana and Mahabharata using concepts such as organising principles, strategic planning and management and emotional quotient which have a huge impact on business and leadership education.

"Both Ramayana and Mahabharata play a significant role in moulding the minds of the common people."-Sri Aurobindo.

Devdutt Pattanaik in the preface of his book "My Hanuman Chalisa" says that whenever he experiences negativity around him or within himself, he hears or read the Hanuman Chalisa, which was composed over 400 years ago by Tulsidas and his faith in humanity gets restored. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata play a major part in the spiritual traditions in the families of Hindu Culture. During the earliest days when the shows were telecasted on the television sets both the epics and incidents described in them had a huge impact in moulding the degenerating situations of the families. The society believed that these epics and the stories and characters embedded in it could lead the people relate to them and therefore correcting their paths and learn to strive for building an ideal familial relationship. The bond between a son and a father, between siblings, between a wife and a husband and the leaders and followers. The people who can and will monitor the stories and incidents from the epics can benefit the society and

mankind in greater ways possible. That is what perhaps is the need of the hour, to begin re-reading the Ramayana and Mahabharata not only as puranas or sastras but to inherit and establish justification through the garb of these stories in a rational manner in the modern times. Both Ramayana and Mahabharata have stories that represent the true self and conscious living of the human beings. One must realise their true nature or true self for their hedonic or over all well-being. This self-actualisation is defined by Aristotle as 'Eudaimonism'. He describes how eudaimonic well-being is living with one's true self. "A real happiness is achieved when an individual lead a virtuous life unimpeachably, dealing with situations with worthiness (Boniwell, 2008).

Conclusion

Bhagvad- Gita, the most important discursion of the Mahabharata is considered as the sacred book of the Hindu Culture. It influences the reader of every age group and is translated into many languages and read by a good deal of readers spread widely across the globe. These modern classical writings are independent works of the epics which in order to read one need to have to have a pre- knowledge of the epics to understand the course of events. Romila Thapar, a well-known historian has elaborated on the production of the epic Ramayana's television retelling. She calls to its plurality representing "different communities" and "reflections of alternate perceptions". She further critiqued, "The Ramayana does not belong to any one moment in history as it has its own history which lies embedded in the many versions which were woven around the theme at different times and places. Not only do diverse Ramayana's exist; each Ramayana text reflects the social location and ideology of those who appropriate it: "The appropriation of the story by a multiplicity of groups meant a multiplicity of versions through which the social aspirations and ideological concerns of each group were articulated. The story in these versions included significant alternations which changed the conceptualization of character, events and meaning." In September 2021, the Madhya Pradesh government decided to include Ramayana and Mahabharata into the first-year engineering programme as elective subjects. Also, on the recommendation of the syllabus committee, Shri Ramacharitmanas was introduced in the first year B.A programme in the curriculum of philosophy, "Ramcharitmanas ke Vyavharik Darshan" (Applied philosophy of Ramcharitmanas) as a part of NEP 2020. While speaking about the decision the education minister of the state said that the scholars have supported the decision and cited that including ancient texts have been helpful in learning successful leadership lessons from the epics. This will help in the overall personality development of the students and help in building a

humanistic attitude towards Life. He further added "the changes are meant to bring our glorious past to the fore." Similarly, a year before in May 2020, Jawaharlal Nehru University's School of Sanskrit and Indic Studies organised a two-day webinar on "Leadership lessons from Ramayana" in collaboration with 'The Ramayana School' with the objective to engage students in a productive manner. The Vice Chancellor of JNU, Jagadesh Kumar Mamidala informed about it in his twitter handle saying, " Mahatma Gandhi emphasized how Lord Rama taught us to uphold truth, justice, equality even under adverse circumstances, there is a greater deal to learn from Ramayana to enrich our lives particularly during these challenging times of Covid-19." Recently, Discovery Plus India shared in their social media page of YouTube that their show "Legends of Ramayana with Amish" has won in the category of Best Documentary at the Promax Digital Re invent OTT Awards. The show premiered on April 7th this year which showcases the retellings of the epic Ramayana which has been retold over many centuries. Amish Tripathi, the famous author of the best seller "Immortals of Meluha" series said in the teaser of the series that, Ramayana remains a living story in every Indian's heart and is the pride of the nation and should be retold over and over again to reach out to the common masses of the country. Jnanpith Awardee, M.T. Vasudevan Nair's, *Randamoozham* a 1997 edition. which was written in Malayalam and was translated into English as the 'Second Turn' is described as a treasure trove of mythological information and is a re- narration of the Mahabharata from the perspectives of the second Pandava- Bhima. Sashi Tharoor's non- fiction, "The Great Indian Novel" displays the story of the Mahabharata by satirizing the Indian political scenario in the year 1975 when Smt Indira Gandhi was the prime minister of the country. Another controversial work is by Rukmini Bhaya Nair whose "The Ayodhya Cantos: Poems" is a collection of poems that weave together mythology and history giving us a sneak peek into the religious event of the destruction of the Babri Masjid of Ayodhya. It is a work of rich evocative and a complex strand of lyrics.

John McLeod, who expertise's in the areas of Post- colonial Literature, diasporic and trans cultural writing and representations of adoption in his book "Beginning Post Colonialism" published in the year 2000, talks about re- reading and re - writing classics or English literature. He takes up in his writings how a writer from a colonized period interprets literature or classics from a different perspective and possibilities of one's own independent critique about the texts. "The re- writing will always invest value in the source- text as a point of reference, no matter how much it is challenged as a consequence. For this reason, some critics believe that re- writings can never fully challenge the authority of the 'classic' text; indeed, re- writings

continue to invest literary 'classics' with value by making them a point of reference for post-colonial texts." (McLeod, 2000) The use of Ramayana and Mahabharata in the contemporary times fascinates the readers and provides them with unique interpretations of the classical texts. As the works are re-narrated with a modern touch without deviating from the original story-lines gives a special textual space into the modern times. The outcome of reading and comparing the stories from these two epics Ramayana and Mahabharata is proposed time and again. These stories are to be followed in a rational manner in order to build ethics and morality as well as maintaining peace and well-being.

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