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A modern approach to retelling of the Mahabharata: A study of Kiran Nagarkar's bedtime story

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Abstract

20th century writers challenging established norms took a new approach to Indian epics by rewriting them. Depicting real social conditions with reference to myths and epics became a popular literary tradition among writers. An epic is not just a story, it also depicts ancient culture and preaches valuable ethics to mankind. Thus, revisiting the epic revives humanity to lead its life ethically. Writers like Amish Tripathi, Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Devdutt Pattnaik, Kavita Kane, Kiran Nagarkar and many others have recreated the past through their retellings. This study focuses on the retelling of Indian myth with special reference to Kiran Nagarkar's retelling of the revered epic Mahabharata in his play Bedtime story which highlights its relevance in modern times.

Keywords: Epics, retelling, Mahabharata, Myth, Kiran Nagarkar, bedtime story

Introduction

Throughout the world, much literature has been created from myths. As Northrop Frye notes in explaining the concept and importance of myth in his article "Myth, fiction and Displacement" (1961) [2];

"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 also belongs in the fine tradition of subversive epic retellings. Nagarkar uses the epic Mahabharata as his base story and translates many of its wonderful stories and characters. It's a game about perseverance, class, societal change, and struggle in the mind, heart, and soul. It was written with the concept of justice, fair-play, equality and humanity. Draupadi, Karna, Eklavya, Arjun and even Krishna are reframed through the lens of caste, gender and human frailty.

A bedtime story is generally told to someone, especially a child, to calm them down and fall asleep. The story of Mahabharata, an ancient and revered Hindu epic, is a favorite bedtime story for children, but Nagarkar's Bedtime story, which is based on this very famous epic, does not serve that purpose. Instead of calming down, it shakes the conscience of the audience and angers them about its subject matter. Nagarkar's performance Bedtime Story hopes to make people wake up and think about social issues and their responsibility to make the world a place worth living. In his 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 wrote it during the Emergency in India called for by the current Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi. Current global events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War and the Indian Emergency awakened his political conscience. He felt that people were apathetic to the whole situation and watched with admirable reticence the acts of depressing criminality, so he took up the subject of personal responsibility by bringing up the political crisis of today.

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Reinterpretation of the epic highlighting social issues

A myth or a collection of tales compiled as an epic not only fascinates readers, it is also a source of inspiration for writers around the world. In Indian literature, the two major epics Ramayana and Mahabharata have always been a source for writers. They not only interpret old myths, but also challenge the deeply ingrained narratives of the reader's consciousness. Creatively minded writers of the modern age reformulate the basic myth to address contemporary issues. These epics are no longer just a product of the past, but have a great impact on modern society as well. New works based on these epics are not just translations of old ones, but have become part of 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 mindsets. He acts as a sharp critic of the Indian caste system. Every Indian reader knows the famous 'guru dakshina' episode that took place between Eklavya, a tribal student and Dronacharya, a revered guru. Eklavya practiced archery in front of the guru's clay image, so Dronacharya is asked to part with his right thumb as a gurudakshina, just to ensure that the tribal archer Eklavya does not surpass his high caste Kshatriya prince Arjuna and Arjuna retains his position as the best 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 Duryodhan 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 entire play is divided into four acts. Each act juxtaposes a Mahabharata scene with its contemporary counterpart, exposing the hypocrisy of ancient and modern society. The play begins with a grandmother narrating the Mahabharata to her grandchildren. A scene where Dronacharya distinguishes between Arjuna, a Kshatriya student, and Eklavya, a tribal student, and refuses to teach Eklavya because of his caste, is juxtaposed with another scene where Eklavya, a Mahar student, tries to save his upper class friend Arjuna before the bloodthirsty family of Draupadi, with whom he had cunningly slept. Arjun runs away from the scene and it is Eklavya who is caught and beaten by Draupadi's family. Draupadi's father abuses him like this-

“...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 meeting with Kunti and her five sons has a parallel present-day storyline where a widow named Rupali wants to run her late husband's family business, but instead of getting help and support, she is ridiculed by her in-laws. The writer tried to make the reader aware of the problem of gender bias that was in the epic and is still prevalent in today's society. Draupadi was never given a choice be it the choice of the groom or later in the dice game and the 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

Your Mahabharata myth teaches the importance of being compassionate, gentle and generous, just like a bedtime story. Taking into account some historical events such as the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Emergency in India, Nagarkar shows how little has changed in the centuries since the Mahabharata. The relevance of the bedtime story is much greater today. Intolerance among people is developing rapidly, developed countries are blindly using the Earth's limited resources, religious leaders, corrupt leaders, powerful industrialists answer to no one, and no one considers their own questioning. Nagarkar cast an unshakable light on evil and was never afraid of dire consequences. The main purpose of retelling the revered epic Mahabharata is to expose all the people who always remain passive to climate change, genocide, religious wars or any brutality of the world. It shows that we are all responsible for anything - in our home, city, country and anywhere else in the world, so we have to consider it. We cannot ignore any injustice that is happening before us. The issues raised by Nagarkar still exist. The issue of political warfare, caste, women's rights, the debate about what is right and what is wrong, all these have not changed at all. Although the story of Bedtime is based on the Mahabharata which was written centuries ago, the modern angle added to it is real, engaging and quite thought provoking.

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