

MODERN RETELLING OF INDIAN MYTHS: A STUDY OF REHASHING MYTHOLOGY THROUGH POPULAR FICTIONS

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ABSTRACT

Indian fictional landscape has witnessed a significant swing in almost all spheres of life especially in the 21st century. In fact, it has been going through a generational change. We have left our borrowed colonial attire far behind and want to read and write more about our own roots, shadows and cultural twigs. By attributing scientific explanations to the conventional cultural ethics, the contemporary writers have recast the indigenous Indian culture with a refreshing perspective which has definitely revived the rich tradition of Indian 'heroic age' and revolutionized the Indian Writing in English in order to acquaint the Indian readers with ancient Indian culture and history. The present paper will study the selected texts of contemporary popular fictional writers, which include, Anand Neelkantan's *Asura and Ajaya*, Krishna Udayashankar's *Aryavarta Chronicles*, Amish Tripathi's *Shiva Trilogy*, Rajiv G. Menonn's *The Ascendance of Indra*, Sharath Komarraju's *The Winds of Hastinapur*, and Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayana 3392 A.D. Series*. The paper focuses on examining how these texts display an array of divergent attitudes towards the characters and incidents in the Indian Epics and Mythology, how these versions of ancient texts reinterpret the mythical past, and how the respective authors utilize myth creatively for coming to terms with the predicament of the present.

KEYWORDS: Mythology, Modern Retelling, Culture, Popular Fiction, Reconstruction, Indianness

INTRODUCTION

Mythology and folklores has been the very foundation of many cultures and civilizations. The mythical stories across cultures are viewed as an embodiment of beliefs, values and philosophies that serves the national interest of the people. In the Western literature *The Bible* is the constituent of Christian values and philosophies. On the other hand, in Indian Literature the Puranas- *The Mahabharata* and *The Ramayana* is embraced as the embodiment of Hindu religious commandments. The mythical characters are the symbolic representation of these traditional values and are viewed as a cultural beacon of the nation. The writers across the world refer back to their conventional mythology to address contemporary issues by reinterpreting the past in the light of the present. The twentieth century poet and critic T.S Eliot in the essay "Tradition and Individual Talent" termed it as, "pastness of the past will be present in the future." The use of myths in literature is not a new phenomenon and this tradition was initiated by Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. The mythical characters and themes in Greek mythology were recounted in history as symbolic representations of cultural beliefs, values, prejudices and philosophies. Thus, the mythology is perennial and keeps growing in terms of perspectives and connotations. Commonly the myths are resplendent with rich themes and narrative forms. The literary artists from every epoch make use of these themes and forms in their art.

Several popular and bestselling books today include lesser known stories in Hindu mythology that are retold in an innovative ways. There seems to be a surge in books, movies and art that analyze episodes and epics in Hindu mythology, re-reading and deriving unexplored meanings from a contemporary perspective. Re-telling Hindu myths played an important role in the Indian nationalist struggle (it helped in imagining a nation state). The myths and the traditional styles of the narratives played an important role in revival of culture and in acting as a unifying force within the society. It helped in imagining an Indian nation state with an identity, history and culture of its own. Myths, as Nietzsche suggested, worked as cultural foundations that saves the society from fragmentation. It builds cultural bonds that brought people together to justify life as desirable in spite of its dark moments.

Though Hindu mythology continues to remain a favored genre in popular fiction, contemporary interest in Hindu mythology has adopted a different approach and has consumed in different ways unique to the times. Contemporary writing of Hindu mythology do not treat it as sacrosanct text; there are creative interpretations and the stories are analyzed, dissected, delve into ambiguous areas and derived meanings are corroborated by discussions and dialogues of readers, thinkers and academicians. The epics are reinterpreted in a way that makes them less godly and more human. The protagonists possess all human emotions including the weaker ones. Their struggles and battles may not always seen driven by higher purposes. The narrative of the myths has changed as universal journeys of characters are retold from individual's point of view. These bring out the human side of the Gods and have made it possible for readers to relate to them in newer ways. The characters are critiqued, scrutinized; story and plots are questioned and connected with contemporary ideologies and issues.

The earlier Indian fictional writers assigned perspectives, meanings, and connotations to the traditional myths. They used archetypes of legendary heroes, symbols, character types and themes. The novels like *The Krishna Key* by Ashwin Sanghi goes back and forth in time, from Krishna's life (from his birth to death) and to contemporary times, when a killer believes himself to be the Kalki avatar, Amish Tripathi's *The Shiva Trilogy* that recreates Shiva, Sati, and other related mythological characters as humans, Krishna Udayshankar's *The Aryavarta Chronicles* too relates mythological characters with human situations and sensibilities. Contemporary re-telling's also attempt a version of feminist revisionist mythology that aims at a strategic revisionist use of gender imagery to transform culture and subvert the heritage that women inherit. Devdutta Pattanaik's *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of Ramayana*, Moyna Chitrakar and Samhita Arni's *Sita's Ramayana* explore Ramayana from Rama's abandoned queen's perspective, Sujoy Ghosh's *Ahalya* inverts the story of Sage Gautama's wife, *Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni revisits *the Mahabhrata* from the perspective of Draupadi and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast Queen* are few examples of popular literature that weave threads of sexuality and feminism in the narration of myths. Attempts at subverting morality and the notions of evil and good, books like *The Aryavarta Chronicles* by Krishna Udyasankar, *Asura: The Tale of the Vanquished* by Anand Neelakantan, *Duryodhana* by V. Ramanathan, *The Difficulty of Being Good: On the Subtle Art of Dharma* by Gurucharan Das attempt to raise important issues of morality from the contemporary perspective. Spoken from the perspectives of the villains of the stories the books aim at reformulating the notions of dharma that dominate Hindu ethics. Books like Devdutta Pattanaik's *Shikandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You* and *The Pregnant King* attempt at re-telling the narratives from the perspectives of marginalized voices of the epics.

The new breed of writers like the Amish, Ashok Banker and Ashwin Sanghi are experimenting the mythology genre by blending it with the other modes of writing. These writers have contributed a lot in popularizing and invigorating

Indian culture and history amongst young Indian readers who had almost forgotten their rich ancient culture and craving for the western one. For instance, Ashok Banker and Amish Tripathi have blended mythology with fantasy mode. With this kind of implementations these writers are modernising the Indian myths. Ashok Banker pioneered this practice of modernising the myths in Indian fictional writing. But he endeavoured to stay true to the original mythical stories by replicating them. On the other hand Amish Tripathi has created purely a fantasy fiction out of the mythical stories. Amish tried a new perspective with this traditional way of handling mythology and has given it a new outlook.

The trend of successful novels having mythological content started in 2003 with Ashok Banker's bestselling eight-volume Ramayana Series. The international acclaim received by Banker and the commercial success of his novels indicated the interest of the people in the mythical past. Many novels followed the tradition started by Banker and today, the novels that are retellings of the Indian mythological stories top the charts. Among the texts considered in the foregoing discussion, Amish Tripathi's Shiva Trilogy is the most popular. It comprises of *The Immortals of Meluha* (2010), *The Secret of the Nagas* (2011) and *The Oath of the Vayuputras* (2013). Amish Tripathi has selected the most charismatic of the Indian gods- Shiva, but he has presented Shiva as a mortal human being, asking,

What if Lord Shiva was not a figment of a rich imagination, but a person of flesh and blood? Like you and me. A man who rose to become godlike because of his karma. That is the premise of the Shiva Trilogy, which interprets the rich mythological heritage of ancient India, blending fiction with historical fact" (Tripathi: 2012).

The search for the meaning of evil is the theme that runs through these three novels. Shiva is first led to believe that the Chandravanshis, Nagas and the Branga are evil. But he discovers that they are not so. Through the course of action of the novels he discovers that good and evil are sides of the same coin. Evil is not a person but a situation. The story tries to rationalize the magical element of the Shiva myth.

Thundergod: The Ascendance of Indra (2012) is the first novel on the proposed 'Vedic Trilogy' by Rajiv G. Menon. Like Tripathi, Menon has selected a god as his protagonist, but Indra is not a god popular with the story tellers. In many of the myths, Indra has been presented as a power thirsty, selfish, deceitful, even cowardly god. Menon has attempted to revert all that with his research amalgamated into an adventure thriller set in mythical times with Indra as the hero. Here Indra has been presented as the son of a tribal leader and celestial being Daeyus who is killed while Indra is a child. Mitra, a sage and a former warrior, brings up Indra along with four other orphans Vayu, Agni, Varuna and Soma. Indra is prophesized to be a leader who will unite the different group of Yavanas, Adityas, Ikshvaakus, Devas for the fight against their common enemies, the Asuras. Indra's way to ascendance is not easy. He has to acquire the leadership of the Devas by his own skill. He, along with Agni, Vayu, Varuna and Soma goes out to win the territory from the Euphrates River to the Harappa. On the whole, the novel presents Indra as the leader who established the Aryans into the Indus Valley.

Krishna Udaysankar's series *The Aryavarta Chronicles* has three novels *Govinda* (2012), *Kaurava* (2013), and *Kurukshetra*. A retelling of *the Mahabharata*, the novels are set in second millennium BCE. In the first novel *Govinda* shows the Aryavart a region divided into several tiny kingdoms as a result of clash between two powerful groups. One is the dynasty of the scholar sages, the descendants of Vasistha Varuni and the other is the Angirasa family, the erstwhile weapon makers to the kings. The Angirasa have the secret knowledge of powerful weapons and when the last secret keeper dies, everyone in Aryavarta tries to get hold of this knowledge so as to become the sole power dominating everyone in the

region. Vyasa, from the clan of the scholar sages, puts the family of the Kurus on the throne of Aryavarta. But they are the vassals of Magadha Kingdom ruled by Jarasandha. The protagonist Krishna is called Govinda shawei and he plans to replace the Kuru family with the Pandavas. He also wants to destroy the Angirasa. Aryavarta is led to a great war for dominance and imperial power, though Govinda has made the Pandavas, the rulers of Aryavarta through peaceful treaties, has ensured that various kingdom under Aryarvarta remain unified. Krishna Udaysankar in her note to the novels mentions that she has consulted the mainstream as well as the alternative versions of the Krishna's myth after which.

It becomes possible to construct a story of why things may have happened as they did, a plausible narrative with reasonable internal logical consistency. Something that could well have been history, something that stands firm not just on faith but also on logic and science" (Udaysankar: 2012).

Anand Neelkantan's two novels *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished- The Story of Ravana and His People* (2012) and *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice- Epic of the Kaurava Clan 1*, are retellings of *the Ramayana* and *the Mahabharata* epics. In *Asura*, the story centers on Ravana depicted as the son of a Brahmin father and Asura mother. He is treated unfairly by his brother, the Emperor Kubera of Sri Lanka kingdom. Ravana is shown to be mobilizing forces and acquiring the throne of the Empire here. Sita is portrayed as Ravana's daughter who had to be abandoned due to a prophesy. She was ordered to be killed but she survives. Then she is kidnapped by Ravana when Ram and Lakshman are in exile. The story shows the Ramayana war and ultimate defeat of Ravana. Neelkantan has based the book on the alternative Ramayana especially recited in the southern part of India. The story is narrated by Ravana and a fictitious character Bhadra who represents the common Indian person, gullible to the politicians. Sita has been presented as Ravana's daughter in the lesser known versions of Ramayana. But once this view is adopted, the whole motif of this story changes drastically. Ravana is not a ten headed demon here. The author has given a symbolic explanation for the ten faces.

Ajaya is the version of *the Mahabharata* told from the Kauravas's perspective. Suyodhana (Duryodhana) represents the Kauravas and believes it to be his birthright to rule the kingdom. Pandavas are the royal princes who follow the rigid laws of caste and pay no need to merit, whereas the Kauravas believe in equality. Suyodhana makes Karna, son of a Charioteer, a king, only on the basis of merit. The book starts with a picture of the childhood days of the Pandavas and Kauravas where Pandavas are shown to be tormenting their cousins. Pandavas are enthroned but the Kauravs must get what is their birthright. The book ends with the gambling episode where the Kauravas win the kingdom with the help of the roll of the dice. In his note to the novel, Neelkantan explains the reason for choosing to write Duryodhana's story. He had visited a village in Kerala where the people regarded Duryodhana as a benevolent prince and celebrated in his honour a festival every year. Duryodhana, in return of the kindness shown to him by an old woman who gave him toddy to quench his thirst constructed a temple with no idol in it. He gave surrounding villages to the temple, appointed an outcast as the priest and it is still believed that he answers the prayers of the villagers. This prompted the author for research on the villainous figure of Duryodhana and he came to the conclusion that Duryodhana was: far removed from the scheming, roaring, arrogant villain of popular television serials and traditional retellings. Instead, here was a brutally honest prince, brave and self-willed, willing to fight for what he believed in. Duryodhana never believed his Pandava cousins to be of divine origin; and to modern minds, their outlandish claim now sounds chillingly similar to present-day political propaganda used to fool a gullible public. (Neelkantan, 7)

Sharath Komaraju's *The Winds of Hastinapur* (2013) is yet another different retelling of the Mahabharata Epic. The Epic is narrated from the points of view of prominent women characters Ganga and Satyawati mainly. The novel begins where Mahabharata has ended. On the last journey, atop the climb of the ice mountain, when all the Pandava brothers are lying dead, Ganga is the last to survive. She knows that her end is near. She recounts the story of the great epic from her perspective in the first half of this novel. The second half is the story the fisher woman Satyawati whom the king Shantanu married. The story covers incidents from the time when Ganga come down to earth and married Shantanu. It concludes with the birth of Satyawati's grandson Dhritarashtra. The births of Pandu and Vidur are awaited. Komaraju actually brings to forefront the voices that are sidelined in the epic. Ganga and Satyawati, though performing very significant roles in the action of the Mahabharata, have never been given the power to express themselves. This retelling goes close to actually the rewriting of the epic.

Shamik Dasgupta's *Ramayan 3392 AD* has three volumes; it is a graphic novel series but the books are also aimed at adult readers. Prominent persons like Deepak Chopra and Shekhar Kapur conceived of this idea of setting Ramayana story in a futuristic time. The future depicted in these books is one where the lives of human beings are in danger because of the Asuras/demons. The Prince Ram, with his brothers, rises as a savior of the human race. The time shown in this text is that of after the third world war. The world is divided into two continents Nark and Aryavarta. Nark is the abode of the Asuras who continually attack the humans living in Aryavarta. Many changes have been made to the storyline of Ramayana. Foreexample, Ram is sent to exile for holding a temporary truce with the Asuras (an act which he was compelled for due to the mortal injury to his brother Lakshman). Seeta is a woman with magical powers whom Ram meets in Mithila and he refuses to marry her though the sage Vishwamitra tells him that it is destined for him to act as a protector to this woman. As in all the graphic novels, the main focus is on action. The frequent skirmishes with the demons are the mainstay of these texts. The apocalyptic setting is an innovation that engages the interest of the reader here.

CONCLUSIONS

Thus, this paper has attempted to present how an author can revisit, resurrect and reconstruct the mythology and how to bring necessary additions to the ancient story and continue it or create altogether a new story. The selected novels are alternative versions of the popular mythological texts. They present the gods, deities, superheroes as common human beings and try to look at the characters as well as incidents in a rational manner. Secondly, the marginalized voices are given preference in these stories. Even in the Shiva Trilogy, Ganesh and Kali have been shown to be made outcasts whom Sati brings back. The voices of erstwhile villains Ravana and Duryodhana (who is specifically called as Suyodhana in all the versions mentioned above) are given expression and the reader gets acquainted with the viewpoint of the vanquished. Thirdly, there is an attempt to give the women characters their due status and that is why some of the novels make it a point to tell the story from the feminine perspective. The post colonial authors seem to be deconstructing the domestic grand narratives here. The indication is that, not only the colonizer suppressed the voices of the colonized, but the dominant cultural groups within the colonized society also smothered the voices of the weaker sections. Finally, these stories are retold not only because of an interest in or a fascination for the mythical past but they also consist of commentaries on the present socio-political situation.

It is no doubt that the Indian fiction scene is going through a generational change where the audience is finally shedding colonial influences and the idea of capitalist superiority. Whatever the intentions of the readers and writers, we

can take hope from the fact that these current retellings allow us to reclaim a Hinduism that is pluralistic and diverse. As we retell the ancient tales in our own voices and for our own times, we can, for example, question the patriarchal strains in the *Ramayana*, we can recall with pleasure the sexuality in the myths of Shiva, we can revel in the powers of Devi. As parents and grandparents, we can tell these stories to our children and grandchildren in our ways, with our concerns, our politics, our worldviews. We can ensure that the versions of these stories that we choose to share are progressive, perhaps even subversive. The stories themselves are generous and fearless; for centuries, they have opened themselves up to multiple tellings, to new twists and turns, to old questions that have new answers.

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