Mahabharata Today: Tradition and Modernity in Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife*

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Introduction

An American journalist Fareed Zakaria once said in an interview that the difference between Indians and Americans could be explained simply: Americans will ask, 'where are you going?', whereas Indians will ask 'where are you coming from?' This apparently simple anecdote says a lot. In producing science fiction, Indian writers, with a few exceptions, have not been quite as successful as the West, though they have fared better with fantasy. It is a truth that in Indian scenario a majority of writers and readers remain obsessed with myth. We are quite stuck in reimagining the past. But the question may arise 'why?' To find out the answer of this why, it can be said that, it is not the future that has captured our political imagination and our dreams for society. We map, we project our ideas of utopias, of good governance onto our myths. Returning to Zakaria, we are more interested in where we have come from than in where we are headed to. We often re-imagine a golden age, an ideal time. So we map our present onto the literature of the past. We look back to the mythic past as a place of great imaginative power that can shape our political fantasies and destinies.

Growing up in India, we are surrounded by stories. Since our childhood days whether we are at home or outside; whether it was during customary festivities at home or school or an ad hoc story time by an elderly relative, stories from our grandparents, we imbibed these stories consciously or subconsciously. In a Hindu household in India the Mahabharata and the Ramayana are integral to the cultural landscape we are exposed to. It was never hard to get a hold of a story from within these two narrative traditions—whether it was through the ubiquitous Amar Chitra Katha (ACK) comic book series, bed-time stories told by family elders, or the colour illustrations of Kalyan monthly magazine published by Gita Press Gorakhpur. Sunday mornings were incomplete without watching B.R. Chopra Mahabharat. Children with a relatively big appetite were lovingly compared to the wolf- belly Bhima Vrikodar from the Mahabharata. It's the default setting of an Indian childhood. Ramanujan writes, "No Hindu ever reads the Mahabharata for the first time. And when he does get to read it, he doesn't usually read it in Sanskrit." There are multiple kinds of retellings of these two epics in India, say it genre fiction, graphic fiction, television shows, oral stories, magazines etc and all. In this paper I am talking only about the genre of mythological fiction, where the myths, the past are re-imagined in this contemporary postmodern context. We are familiar with all these stories since our very childhood. Therefore it's not surprising that readers like to read mythological fiction which is based on these stories. If we see the current scenario in India, a legion of authors produce bestselling works inspired by myth: say for example,

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Ashok Banker, Krishna Udayshankar, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Devdutt Pattanayak, Kavita Kane, Ashwin Sanghi, Amruta Patil, Aditya Iyengar, Karthika Nair and so on. The retellings of these famous epics have always been popular in regional languages. Gajendra Kumar Mitra's *Panchajanya* which was originally written in Bangla or Iravati Karve's *Yuganta- End of an Epoch* which was initially written in Marathi, later translated into English are fascinating analysis of The Mahabharata's characters in regional languages. Krishna Udayshankar for her *Aryavarta Chronicles* wrote about the plot and the human condition that the plot is not the point, the human condition is: "There is a larger story here, which will endure no matter how it's told. I mean that not in any spiritual sense, but more in the vein of a faith in humanity, a faith in basic values, of non-judgement and acceptance… it has been a powerful and useful tool, because it helps parse out moral imperative from moral principle. Moral principles are relatively immutable, whereas moral imperatives are often context and society specific. They also change over time. As a result, for an epic such as the *Mahabharata,* or any tale for that matter, to retain its lauded status, it must either adapt to the existing imperatives. Or else there must be some justification for defying them. And that is why we have variations and interpolations."

Reception of Mythological Fiction in Contemporary India

Now coming to the readers of India, we have always been fascinated with mythical stories. We even try to find out solutions of our own problems from the epics. So it's very obvious that we will grab these boos, these mythological fictions in a magnanimous way. Liberalization in 1990s had a great impact on the Indian English publishing industry. With the Foreign Exchange Management Act (1999) various multinational publishing firms like Picador, Random House, Routledge, Pearson Education, Butterworths, Harper Collins, Scholastic and Cambridge University Press entered the Indian publishing market. The first wave of Indian English science fiction and fantasy starts appearing around 2003. Myth and mythic elements were utilised in different approaches and varying degrees in the works of Ashok Banker and Samit Basu. At the time, there were doubts about the experiment. Ashok Banker has spoken in interviews about how difficult it was for him to get accepted by an English publisher. But despite the initial success Banker branched into other genres. It would be Amish Tripathi, a Mumbai based finance sector professional, who would force other English publishers to reconsider mythological genre fiction as profitable commercial fiction investment in the Indian book market, setting off a bigger second wave of mythological genre fiction in Indian English. And we all know the present scenario now. Readers or audience have so deeply fascinated by these fictions that this genre has become bestsellers now.

To find out the answer of this huge popularity Kavita Kane argued, "Mythology can be a huge canvas for contemporary thought. It is not telling us some old tales, as so carelessly assumed, of Gods and Goddesses, but of man and his follies and fallacies." If we see the Mahabharata, the greatest saga ever, it is found that all the roles are reversed at some point- the valorous warrior Arjuna becomes despondent and turns into a pacifist and even godhead Krishna resorts to human tactics and counsels on warfare. Even the most profound treatise on salvation is not Utopian in nature and does not necessarily rescue the individual from the abysmal world (Radhakrishnan, 1948); instead they are instruments for shaping and reshaping individual and social consciousness (Nandy, 1987) by repeatedly directing our attention to the complexity and multiplicity of truth. According to reader response theory, the meaning of the text depends on how the reader

interprets the text. Interpretation is not a simple matter of discovery, but a complex act of creation. Thoughts instilled in a reader through the text and never coincide with the intentions of the author. And this disjuncture between reader, text and author is the most immediate reality in understanding and therefore they must be considered partners on equal footing in the aesthetic activity (Vygotsky, 1971). Texts and readers do not exist in isolation; they have their unique histories, and operate in an ever-changing world. Reading a literary text at a fundamental level has at least three elements: the author, the text and the reader. Vygotsky pointed out that the psychology of art can only be studied as an interacting system. Interaction is not merely an exchange of words; instead involves interpretation of voices and feelings. The reader is not someone who exists outside the text, but instead as Susan Suleiman notes, "may be in a text as a character is in a novel." Thus the reader, even while possessing the text, is simultaneously possessed by it.

Wolfgang Iser points out that any literary work has two poles: the artistic, which is a creation of the author and the aesthetic, which is accomplished by the reader. As a result the reading process is phenomenological in nature. According to Bakhtin's 'Dialogism', a text is not a thing but an event. Meanings originate and therefore understanding a text can only be dialogic.

The reality of the Indian epics the Ramayana and the Mahabharata (and the retellings of them) is refracted through the individual's interpretation of everyday reality. In this regard, Yuri Lotman (1990) explains, "The spatial picture of the world is many layered: it includes both the mythological universum and scientific modelling and everyday 'commonsense'." The reader does not approach the epic text with a tabula rasa or a set of natural cognitive apparatuses to decode the text; instead, in understanding this historical text, the individual's own 'history of understanding' and the history of the text interact and such a dynamic process brings about new meanings of the text. Historical time, personal time and mythical time become palpable and visible, adding thick layers of meaning to the self, text and context.

Mahabharata Today

The original Sanskrit Mahabharata has been decentred by today's "many Mahabharatas" paradigm. The audience rarely engage with the original Sanskrit text, rather they often tend to enthral with the multiple retellings of the great epic. The "many Mahabharata" paradigm include all the possible retellings of Mahabharata, say it television shows, movies, graphic illustrations, mythological fiction et al. The Mahabharata has a fantastic influence on Indian Literature, in both regional languages and in English language. In this paper we will discuss only about mythological fiction, novelization of the great epic. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* and Kavita Kane's *Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen* are the novelization of the grand epic The Mahabharata with some entirely new perspectives, insights, events, structures and styles- moral imperatives (as they are context and society specific) as Krishna Udayshankar argued.

Palace of Illusions

> At his touch something breaks, a chain that was tied to the woman-shape crumpled on the snow below. I am buoyant and expansive and uncontainable— but I always was so, only I never knew it! I am beyond name and gender and the imprisoning patterns of ego. And yet, for the first time, I'm truly Panchaali.
>
> (Divakaruni, *The Palace of Illusions*, 360)

The novel is a contemporary and timeless portrayal of the grand epic The Mahabharata. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni destabilizes the focus of the grand narrative through her astounding narration. The novel allows insight into interaction of gender and identity and challenges the original narrative through the contemporary perspectives. The novel begins with Draupadi's birth and progresses along the line of her life. Panchaali herself becomes the chronicler of her own life and the narrator as well. *The Palace of Illusion* retells the Mahabharata through Draupadi's eyes. Any retelling always serve 'moral imperatives', by remoulding the original plot under contemporary social contexts. 'Divakaruni has challenged the traditional notions by the means of the character Draupadi. Draupadi takes the initiative to retell the story because she believes that her role as the narrator would be helpful to give an authentic account of history which would gradually overturn all the previous narratives and fill the blanks and loopholes in the great epic.' Kavita Nair argued on Draupadi as a narrator as "she does not want either a sanitized version or distorted version of the past, but a factual one." Draupadi is portrayed as a very sceptical woman, curious about almost everything in the world irrespective of both the material and spiritual world. Even at the very end of the novel, at the time of her last breath during the Mahaprasthan, Krishna commented, "Skeptical to the last!" (*The Palace of Illusions,* 359) After confronting loads of her queries, Krishna mocked, "Will you never be done with questioning?" (*The Palace of Illusions,* 359) Her queries began from the very beginning of her life. While portraying the story of the Mahabharata from Draupadi's perspectives in contemporary post modern context, Divakaruni deliberately presents various postmodern characteristics in this novel.

The poststructuralist, postmodern concept rather technique 'spatial and temporal transfer' (Genette, 213) is employed by design in this novel by Divakaruni. The day before the beginning of the Dharmayuddha, Vyasa, the divine composer of the Mahabharata gives Draupadi a special boon that gives her the power to visualize and hear all the incidents happening in the Kurukshetra war; a *divyadrishti*. Vyasa says, "I want to offer you a gift- the same that I offered the blind king: a special vision so that you may see the most important parts of the battle from afar." (*The Palace of Illusions, 253-254*). *The Palace of Illusions* is more likely a bildungsroman that chronicles the protagonist's life as a process of experiencing life from all the possible aspects, gaining knowledge and finally finding her own true self. The novel ends with an open-ended structure where 'for the first time she becomes truly Panchaali'.

Karna's Wife: The Outcast's Queen

Kavita Kane's novel *Karna's Wife: An Outcast's Wife* is a retelling of Mahabharata from a perspective of Uruvi, a fictitious character, portrayed as Karna's second wife. As it is a retelling of the grand narrative, the storyline is known to all but the story is narrated in an entirely new and different way. It is a revisionist version of the Mahabharata told from different perspectives. That well known, traditional story is told under the contemporary postmodern context. And every modern woman can relate with the protagonist, Uruvi as Kavita Kane created her with all modern characteristics. She is a kshatriya princess of Pukeya; she was a pampered child and did everything according to her own consent throughout her life. She married an outcast Karna despite all the vigilance made by her parents. She had the guts to question almost everything odd around her; she observes things and persons and analyses them critically; she has a strong point of view. Uruvi, who acts as a constant reminder of Karna's low born as she is a elite born

Kshatriya princess, redefines the existence of Karna by stating, "[a] Sutaputra who was born to show valour and achieve glory… [and] for me that makes you enough of a Khatriya." Kavita Kane created this fictitious character Uruvi to intrude into Karna's private life. In an interview with IndiaBookStore, Kavita Kane argued, "… Karna though revered and unanimously popular, remains quite a mystery- his private life is entirely not known. He is seen either as Arjuna's rival or Duryodhan's friend, the tragic hero who is doomed and damned." Kane deliberately used postmodern features in this novel and along with maintained the traditional aesthetics. *Karna's Wife: An Outcast's Queen* is a bildungsroman that chronicles the protagonist's life as a process of experiencing life and an experiment, gaining knowledge about the outer world as well as knowing her own true self. The novel ends with an open-ended structure where it's up to the readers to fill in the gaps in accordance with their own imagination.

Conclusion

Both the novels feature postmodern aspects retaining traditional aesthetics in them. The Mahabharata is a grand narrative which celebrates heroism and the Great War fought for righteousness- *Dharmayuddha*. But in these retellings the focus shifts from hero based grand narrative to reader centred poststructuralist narrative. Both the protagonists Draupadi and Uruvi address the contemporary twenty first century readers and retell the great ancient epic with their own perspectives. Hence we can rightly say that today's Mahabharata is a conjuncture of tradition and modernity.

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