



NEUTRALIZING STEREOTYPES IN ANAND NEELAKANTAN'S *AJAYA: THE ROLE OF THE DICE*

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Abstract

Literature has ever served a companion to mankind and remained close to the beliefs was ever considered as a guiding light to the whole of life. Mythology particularly in India is intertwined with the customs, beliefs and practices that every Indian would have witnessed. That's the reason why mythological fictions took their turns in literary history to win the minds and attention of the readers. While *Jaya* by Devdutt Patnaik speaks about the victorious and virtuous Pandavas, *Ajaya* by Anand Neelakantan speaks about the antagonist and much averted Su(Dhur)yodhana and his qualities unknown to the general audience.

In his treatment with the Myths, Anand Neelakantan has taken a liberal choice of demythifying and made the characters take a more human form rather than Gods and Demi-Gods. The author also attempts to break the classical stereotyping of the characters. Draupadhi, Subadhra, Aswathama, Karna all have their own virtues and vices stated as the story proceeds. Duryodhana is a kind hearted man who always wonders about the voidness of the concept of *varna* – caste differences. He doesn't rush to get a good name from his teacher but is more poised and even tends the bird that becomes a prey of Arjuna's arrow. Arjuna to display his skill to the world ruthlessly aims at the eye of the bird.

This study underlines the fact that the definition of so called *dharma* by so called great Brahmins are always circumstantial in nature. In the treatment of the author's retelling, each character is given their space to break stereotypical characteristics and portrays both good and evil equally in all the characters of this great epic. This perspective actually enhances the critical thinking in younger generation readers actually encourages a skeptical view on every fact that confronts them.

Literature has ever served a companion to mankind and remained close to the beliefs was ever considered as a guiding light to the whole of life. Fiction is a form of literature which encourages even an average reader to get accustomed with the ideals discussed in the literary arena. Mythology particularly in India is intertwined with the customs, beliefs and practices that every Indian would have witnessed. That's the reason why mythological fictions took their turns in literary history to win the minds and attention of the readers. The re-telling has given new dimensions to the classical mythology. In a way these mythological stories are already part of an Indian childhood. These are actually the stories that led to many branching histories and part of every sacred belief that an Indian still holds to. Indian writers were shrewd enough to exploit such an interesting ground by the retellings of great epics like Ramayana and Mahabharata. Over centuries these epics proved to be a prolific source of many sub stories, fictions, historical dramas, religious principles, common beliefs that rooted and evolved in this Indian culture.

The notable line of story tellers who adopted this great mythology marks the Sahitya award winning *Yuganta: The End of an Epoch* by Irawati Karve an anthropologist. It is an analysis of Mahabharata and its protagonist. It explores many events of the great epic and its socio-political perspective. Later came the authors like Chetan Bhagat, Devdutt Patnaik, Amish Tripathi who exploited and gave best-seller novels in this arena. Mahabharata is an all encompassing epic tale which is said to be of 12 times the size of Bible and 10 times the length of classical epic models - *Iliad and Odyssey* consisting of about 200,000 individual verse lines. Devdutt Patnaik's *Jaya* greets the audience with hundreds of facts and sub-stories which impresses the readers and shows the royal dimensions of great epic by encompassing all the smart details of all major characters and the reason for their fate making the grand epic still more complicated and exhausting with its various sub-plots and sub-stories. The novel taken for analysis is its contradictory *Ajaya*. While *Jaya* by Devdutt Patnaik speaks about the victorious and virtuous Pandavas, *Ajaya* by Anand Neelakantan speaks about the antagonist and much averted Su(Dhur)yodhana and his qualities unknown to the general audience.

The author bases this story indicating a temple in Kerala which worships Duryodhana and in his note mentions an old villager's comment, "If our Lord Duryodhana was an evil man, why did the great men like Bhishma, Drona, Kripa and the entire army of Krishna, fight the war on his side" (Neelakantan, 8). With this strong realistic note, he prepares the audience to view the side of Duryodhana which the world has never cared to appreciate.

Anand Neelakantan succeeds in impressing audience with the post-modernistic view of considering the good as well as the evil in every character in Mythology irrespective of the accepted notion whether he is a protagonist or an antagonist. He has well brought out the fact that a coin has two sides and that every situation can be viewed from totally two opposing viewpoints. He also engraves the fact in reader's mind that no one can be as perfect as one described in ancient mythical stereotypes.

In his treatment with the Myths, Anand Neelakantan has taken a liberal choice of demythifying and made the characters take a more human form rather than Gods and Demi-Gods. The author also attempts to break the classical stereotyping of the characters. The very name of Duryodhana is replaced by a positively sounding Suyodhana, because 'Dhur' is a prefix attached to negative things. As he clearly mentions in author's note –

One of the meanings of Duryodhana is 'one' difficult to conquer, in the other words, Ajaya(Unconquerable). Though named Suyodhana, the Pandavas used the derogatory 'Dur' to slander him as 'one who does not know how to wield power or arms'. (Neelakantan 8)

Duryodhana is portrayed a man of valour and courage, an icon of genuine friendship and a man who always shuns caste differences. From young age he has been portrayed as a kind-hearted and empathetic boy. He once hugs his uncle Vidhura while his Pandava cousins were reluctant about the caste of their uncle. They always followed their *dharma*. The author also expounds on the voidness of the concept *dharma*. Kripa, a great maverick brahmin warrior and brother in-law of guru Drona, says that whatever the silly priests of their age speak, it is nowhere written in the scriptures and adds that every *varna* is important in its own way.

Similarly the author scrutinizes the character of Pandava brothers, their mother Kunti, Ghandhari, Karna, Draupadhi and all the minor characters. These characters are rendered with a view which is new to Indian classical audience. We, Indians, have perceived Mahabharata as a clash between the *dharma* and *adharma*. Dharma wins at the end stating the whole Hindu society the importance of following *dharma*. Kunti was one of the *Panchkanyas* or five revered ladies of Hindu religion. There is a popular belief that worshipping these women in morning will remove all our sins. She is considered as a woman who has borne all the injustice done to her. In this novel, *Ajaya: The Roll of the Dice*, the author depicts the treacherous nature of Kunti and instances where it is Kunti is responsible for this hatred among cousins.

Draupadhi, Subadhra, Aswathama, Karna all have their own virtues and vices stated as the story proceeds. Guru Dhrona is a much revered teacher of the whole Kuru clan. He is also portrayed as an arrogant Brahmin who criticizes Karna for being born in low caste. He never misses a chance to accuse Duryodhana for his trivial mistakes and calls him a son of blind King. This characteristic is very unusual for a teacher who teaches *dharma* which is the burning question of the whole epic Mahabharata.

This study underlines the fact that the definition of so called *dharma* by so called great Brahmins are always circumstantial in nature. When a shrewd, skilled student like Ekalavya is asked for his right thumb as *guru-dhakshana* (offering to the teacher), the definition of a good teacher itself stands a question. But when Ekalavya doesn't hesitate a moment to cut his right thumb finger and give to a guru who never taught him in person, then the definition of a good student moves a reader. A human mind cannot stop itself from comparing both and deciding who is actually great – the blindly ruthless high class guru or the blindly obedient low-class student?

The novel completely concerns itself with several such circumstances which seems highly credible yet opposing to the stereotypical view that every Indian was holding all these days. An Indian mythological reader is in the verge of his pity when he finds five brothers being wronged by a whole kingdom and the reader curses the fate of the heroes who were personifications of truth, valour, skill and dharma. All these days Kauravas were cursed, Pandavas were pitied and accepted without a question that the dharma was established by killing thousands in the so called *dharma-yudha*. But the author's rendering is a complete turn of the table to understand what made an antagonist become cruel or if that can really be called cruel and understanding there can never be one ultimate truth in this world.

One of the major themes of Anand Neelakantan's writing has been giving voice and turning everyone's attention to justifications of the vanquished characters of great epics of Indian mythology. In this line Anand Neelakantan's novels *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished* (2012), *Vanara: The Legend of Baali, Sugreeva and Tara* (2018), *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013), *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* (2015) and some of the Bahubali series have directly hit the shelves of the Indian audience. In his interview to *The Hindu* dated 12 Aug. 2015, the author states, "I want to say that the book is just an alternative viewpoint and not a criticism. It is a debate, an analysis and viewing from all angles"

This research paper's intention is to highlight that any Indian student or a reader is able to find that no character is stereotyped or projected in a classical point of view. Each character is given their space to break stereotypical characteristics which portrays both good and evil equally in all the characters of this great epic. This perspective actually enhances the critical thinking in younger generation readers actually encourages a skeptical view on every fact that confronts them. They need to analyse the pros and cons of each character they encounter in fiction as well as in real life. Such authors and perspectives are to be encouraged along with the classical beliefs that our societal culture follows. Any reader is able to juxtapose both and arrive to a conclusion that they are comfortable with.

References:

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