



## THE FASCINATING WORLD OF RETELLINGS: RETELLINGS OF THE INDIAN EPICS

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### ABSTRACT

The Indian epics provide a good number of materials for the modern day writers to interpret and re-create. The web of retellings makes it possible that each creative writer can claim a new version of his own. The Indian epics are retold by many writers. These include indigenous as well as foreign versions. Many of these re-workings aim to bring out the ideologies of the age. These retellings were influenced by the predominant social, political and cultural tendencies. They helped in surveying the epic from different angles and helped in reviving the various characters that were thrown to the margins by main stream literature. Thus, we can say that the exploration through the various retellings of the epics is at the same time interesting, inspirational and thought provoking.

**Key Words:** Retellings, Indian epics, Narrative tradition

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Is there a single author or compiler? .....

Is there a single text? ( [www.mahabharatharesources.org](http://www.mahabharatharesources.org))

Human beings always live in a social group interacting with each other, sharing their thoughts feelings and emotions. So it is true to say that the tendency to narrativise is inherent in every human being who lives in an interactive social group. The development of an appropriate relationship between man and society indicated the creation of several didactic tales such as philosophical doctrines of Jainism and Buddhism. The Indian fictional literature particularly novels were influenced by these narrative stories. India has a rich tradition of narrative literature. We cannot tell exactly when this art of storytelling began in India. While analyzing the scriptures, it is evident that various narrative techniques were adopted by the Indians to narrate the various incidents happened around them.

There is greater flexibility in Indian narratives, especially, the epics. The great Indian

epics, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata provide many stories and sub stories which form the richest treasure house of Indian narratology. Apart from providing infinite number of tales, they provide an umbrella concept of fictional resources that appeal to the Indian mind. The Ithihasa or Epic narrative has a special importance in Indian narrative tradition in which the human element dominates than any other narrative mode. Human choice has much relevance in these narratives. They cover all areas of human psychology and resolve many intellectual and moral questions. These features of the epics provide profuse scope for retelling. As Dr. K. Ayyappa Paniker suggests, there is no one to claim the copy right even if Vyasa's name is spelt differently and it is not going to influence the epic in any substantial way. He adds:

This is why there are *Ramayanas* and *Ramayanas* in India, and each one has its own place intact. The omission or addition of a few lines or even the change of the

name of a character is no earth shaking matter. In some versions of Ramayana, Sita is the daughter of Ravana; in others Ravana is one of Sita's suitors. This flexibility of narrative details ensures the anonymity of the author. Anyone can produce his own version and fancy his own authorial privilege. (*Indian Narratology* 14)

Indian literature has produced a lot of re-workings of the epics. The epics are retold according to different cultures, giving new shades, adding new characters and stories and thus altering the overall frame work itself. Romila Thaper has made serious efforts to analyze the various interpretations of the epics especially the Ramayana. In the forward to Paula Richman's *Questioning Ramayana's: A South Asian Tradition*, she says:

... remapping the location of a *katha* or story of Rama has been a constant feature of Indian civilization... The *Valmiki Ramayana* should not be necessarily taken as a fixed text... Each variant is better seen in its own specific context before it is juxtaposed with the authoritative versions. (vii).

The Ramayana depicts Rama, the king of Ayodhya, as the embodiment of all virtues of the world. It deals with the themes of love, power, duty, devotion and quest. As Romila Thaper says, the Ramayana incorporates the universal theme of the struggle between good and evil. The Ramayana was retold into many Indian languages from the medieval times itself. A version of the epic in Prakrit that belongs to 4<sup>th</sup> century is a notable one. The first Indian version was Kamban's *Kambaramayanam*. This retelling is significant text in Tamil literature. Nagachandra wrote another version in Kannada titled *Ramachandra Charitrapurana*. This had a different storyline. Here Ravana is the tragic hero of the epic. He abducts Sita in a moment of weakness and in this version he is killed by Lakshmana instead of Rama. Sarala Dasa in his Oriyan version deviates slightly from Valmiki's version. According to him, it is the milk man's tale that led to the banishment of Sita. Ezhuthachchan's *Adhyathmaramayanam Kilippattu* and Tulasidas's *Ramacharitamanas* are notable works that aimed at infusing bhakti in the minds of

people. These two works have great relevance as they are very much incorporated with the socio-political context.

In contemporary literature also many writers have ventured to recreate the epic. Some notable works in Malayalam literature are C.N.SreekantanNair's trilogy of plays which make use of the Ramayana to mould its frame work, Sarah Joseph's feminist analysis titled *Ramayana Stories*, Balamani Amma's "Valmiki" etc. The most recent retellings of the epics entirely have a different outlook. They treat the epic in innovative ways, sometimes completely subverting the entire epic framework. An anthology titled *In Search of Sita- Revisiting Mythology (2009)* by Malashri Lal and Namita Gokhale is a good example which consists of a number of creative interpretations of Sita's character. It even includes a letter written by Sita to her unborn daughter. Another one is an animated feature film by Nina Paley *Sita Sings the Blues (2008)*. It cannot be considered just as an animated version. It incorporates multiple narratives of the same story told in different settings and tones.

Sita's Ramayana by Samhita Arni and Moyna Chitrakar re-tells the epic through the eyes of Rama's abandoned queen Sita. This graphic novel which tells the epic from Sita's point of view allows the reader to inquire into the emotions of the central character. Another one of this kind is *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana* by Devdutt Pattanaik.

It is difficult to list out the enormous retellings that come to light now a days. Each one has its own place and importance in Indian literary scenario. As Paula Richman says, "throughout Indian history many authors and performers have produced... diverse telling of Ramayana in numerous media (*Many Ramayanas* 9). So it is wrong to assume that Valmiki's *Ramayana* is a definitive text and others are mere derivations. As Richman adds:

We need [instead] to consider the "many *Ramayanas*", of which Valmiki's telling is one. Tulsi's another, Kamban's another... Like other authors, Valmiki is rooted in a particular social and ideological context. His text... is one among many." (*Many Ramayanas* 9)

The *Mahabharata*, the longest epic, revolves around the complexities of family ties and continues to be an inspiration to the writers all over the world. The range and complexity of characters of the epic have inspired a lot of creative retellings and adaptations. The *Mahabharatha*, like a rolling stone gathered all it can as it rolled from one generation to another and as a result it had multiple versions in different parts of the world ([nptel.ac.in/courses/lecture33](http://nptel.ac.in/courses/lecture33)) "Poets have told it before, poets are telling it now, other poets shall tell this history on earth in the future" (<http://mahabharata-resources.org/quotes.html>). It is difficult to keep track of the multiple Mahabharathas as most Indian languages have their version of the epic. English translations were also done after the British colonization of India. Romesh Chandra Dutt's version, *Mahabharatha, the Epic of Ancient India Condensed into English Verse* was published in 1898. P. Lal's transcreation of the epic is also a famous one.

Thus the *Mahabharata* inspired many number of adaptations and rewritings. From Kalidasa's *Abhijnanasakuntalam* itself this inclination can be traced out. His *Raghuvamsam* also used the epic to create the frame work. The earliest traditions of the epic retellings can be traced back to the works of Sarala Dasa and Balrama Dasa in medieval Orissa. Their works show insightful knowledge of the Vedas and Puranas. As centuries passed, the epic even became the material for an open instigation against war and related violence. The epic has been transcreated into various other art forms like dance and painting. Raja Ravi Varma has used the epic as source material for a lot of his paintings. Dance forms like Kathakali and Yakshagana almost entirely draw their material from the Mahabharatha.

The *Mahabharatha* has been retold and rewritten several times giving emphasis to its various characters. Many of the reworkings point to the emergence of post colonial discourse in which the text focuses on the marginalized voices. Many Indian writers made use of the myths of the *Mahabharatha* in their novels. Raja Rao's *Kanthapura* and *The Serpent of Rocks* and

R.K.Narayan's *The Man –Eater of Malgudi* used the variations of these myths.

A prominent work which uses the epic myth is Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* (1989). It is constructed as an epic dictated by an aged politician VedVyas. Girish Karnad's *Yayathi* also uses the myth of *Mahabharatha*. Devdutt Patnaik is a novelist who constantly focuses on such retellings. His novel *The Pregnant King* tells the story of Yuvanashva a childless king who accidentally drinks the magic potion meant to make his wives pregnant. *Jaya*, another work by Patnaik concentrates on the various plots and sub-plots of the grand epic.

*Parva*, a novel written by S.L.Bhyrappa, based on *The Mahabharatha* is also a notable re-creation. It is in the form of personal reflections of some of the important characters of the epic. Shivji Sawant's *Mrityunjay* is modeled as an autobiography of the tragic figure Karna. He has written another novel, *Yugandhar* which focuses on the life of Lord Krishna. P.K. Balakrishnan's *Ini Njan Urangate* also deals with the life of Karna. M.T.Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* places Bheema as its central character and tries to bring out the inner consciousness and subtleties in Bheema's character. Chira Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Mahaswetha Devi's *Druapadi* and Prathiba Ray's *Yajnaseni* focus on the life of Drupadi. *Karna's Wife – The Outcast's Queen*, by Kavita Kane is a most recent retelling of this kind in which we come across a strong woman, Karna's wife – Uruvi. *An Indian Odyssey* by Martin Buckley and *Mahabharata: The Eternal Quest* by Andy Fraenkel are some of the notable attempts by foreigners in this genre.

As we go along with the world of retellings of the Mahabharata, it is evident that many folk variations of the epic exist in different regions of India as well as outside India. These narratives subvert and change even the basic frame work of the epic. New characters are added and new dramatic situations enter into the narratives. Among Dungri Bhil community of the Gujarat exist a version of *Mahabharatha* known as *Bhilonu Bharat* which incorporates many new stories told in their traditional way of narration. The Bengali version of the *Mahabharatha* has many added stories. They have even altered the concluding part of the epic.

Another notable retelling of the epic is Villputturar's Bharatham which incorporates an episode of Duryodhana conducting aabhichara (black magic) to kill Pandavas. Sarala Dasa in the Oriya *Mahabharata* celebrates the cosmic figure of Krishna and inquires into the complex relation with Arjuna. The Tamil variations of the epic have specific reference to the legend of Alli, a non-Vyasan character. This character has striking similarity with Chitrangada of Rabindranath Tagore's dance-drama, *Chitrangada*,

The Bheels have propagated their own version of the *Mahabharatha*. They added many new episodes like Karna goes in search of his father, the Sun God and meets him, Draupadi being raped by Vasuki, etc. Their version of *Mahabharatha* has tried to bring out the greatness of Karna. His lifelong humiliation is brought into light and is sympathetically analyzed. The epic narratives have extended its roots to Indonesia, Japan and other Asian countries

A retelling of the epic in the islands of Indonesia has dared even to change the name of the characters itself. Various sub-variations of the epic can also be seen among the islands. The characters are given regional names in order to make them familiar. In the Indonesian version Parasara marries Sathayavathi and their son Kresna Dwaipayana becomes the King of Hastinapura after the death of Bhishma's brothers. He marries the Princesses of Kasi Kingdom, Ambika and Ambalika, after the death of his half-brothers. After years he steps down as king and carries on a life as a hermit. He changes his name to Begaban Abiyoso (Vyasa). Here Bhishma is sent by King Sentanu (Shantanu) and Satyawati in Kasi to win the three princesses Amba, Ambika and Ambalika for his two younger brothers. Shantanu is alive when Bhishma goes to the Swamvara. In the Indian epic Shantanu is already dead. The story is again elaborated and it portrays as Amba falls in love with Bhishma. Bhishma tries hard to convince her. But she was not ready to go. At last, he tries to scare her with his arrow. Unintentionally the arrow gets shot, and Amba is killed. Amba's spirit curses Bhishma. Gendari (Gandhari) is portrayed as one who plants hatred in the mind of her sons against Pendawa (Pandavas) because her love to Pandu is rejected. During Draupadi's swamvara when Karna's

term came, many people believed that he should be the winner when he raised the bow without any difficulty. But in the Indonesian version he misses the target and fails. (<http://www.boloji.com>). Thus the Indonesian version transgresses the common and accepted frame work of epic.

The literary and artistic history of Kerala shows its close relation and indebtedness to the epic. Kerala has profound history of *Mahabharatha* retellings not only in its literary arena but also in its oral and theatrical tradition. The Kannassa Bhratham, Bharatham Pattu Cherusseri Bharatham (Bhrathagadha) Srimahabharatham Kilipattu of Thunchattu Ezhuthachan etc were the popular retellings of the epic which dates back from fifteenth century. Many oral traditions were also prevalent during the middle ages. Nizhalkuttu episode forms a part of the oral epic narrative. The ritualistic art forms such as Kuthu, kathakali, Kudiyattam, and Thulal are molded based on the epic stories. Most of these retellings contain subtle variations compared to Vyasa's Epic. For example, in Cherusseri Bharatham there is a variation in the story of Samthanu and Satyavati: In Cherusseri's version, the King was afflicted with a type of cancer. Blessed by Parasara, Satyavati's body was producing Kasthuri which was used for treating the King as suggested by physicians. She refused to accept any payment for the Kasthuri. The King was completely cured of the disease. Thus Samthanu came to know about Satyavati. The King met and fell in love with her. Another example to note is in Ezhuthachan's Srimahabharatham Kilipattu. Before the Pandavas set off their journey to the forest, Sahadeva gives a description of Kaliyuga which ends with the words, "It is not good to live on earth. Let's leave", thus giving a hint to the coming age of man. (<http://mahabharataresources.org/variations/mvm>). So it is right to say that there are interconnections between various retellings of Mahabharata in different regions of India.

The retellings of the epics enrich Indian narratology by its elasticity of structure and by its flexible and fluid nature of narration. It is recorded that Vyasa has created two versions of the epic. The one is an abridged version of the epic and the other is an extended version. At first Vyasa wrote

*Bharatha* consisting of twenty four thousand slokas which formed the abridged version and then he expanded it into one containing one lakh slokas which became the *Mahabharatha*. As analyzed in this manner, it is evident that the author has never defined the boundary of the text. Thus it becomes unique in the history of literature where the reader has been granted the freedom to read and retell the text depending on his inclination and discretion. Many of these retellings are influenced by the prevailing or predominant tendencies of their social, political and cultural atmospheres. They are also helpful in channelizing cultural continuity. Thus by adding new shades to already told stories, these retellings enrich the Indian narrative tradition.

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