

Retelling of the Mahabharata as a Historical Event in S. L. Bhyrappa's *Parva*

Dr Harish G. Tapadia

Asst. Professor of English

Vasantrao Naik Government Institute of Arts and Social Sciences, Nagpur

Abstract: S. L. Bhyrappa is one of the greatest contemporary Kannada writers. His novel *Parva* is a demythologized version of the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. The present paper attempts to study Bhyrappa's scrutiny of the Mahabharata from the point of view of a modern mind and its retelling as a historical event. The original Mahabharata story is full of supernatural occurrences and assigns divinity to certain characters. But Bhyrappa treats all the characters as human beings, comprised of a mixture of good and bad qualities in different proportions.

Keywords: S. L. Bhyrappa, *Parva*, Krishna, Historical Event, Retelling.

Along with U. R. Ananthamurty, S. L. Bhyrappa is one of the greatest contemporary Kannada writers. He has written twenty-five novels, prominent among them being *Dharmashree*, *Vamshavruksha*, *Saaritha*, *Daatu* and *Parva*. Most of his major novels have strong roots in ancient Indian philosophical tradition and his views on caste, religion and gender have made him a controversial figure. *Parva*, regarded as Bhyrappa's Magnum Opus, the most discussed and applauded among all of his works, is a demythologized version of the Mahabharata, the great Indian epic. According to Aravind Adiga (2013), *Parva*, one of the most breath-taking of twentieth century Indian novels, is a study of human character under extreme stress based on the author's entering into the minds of major characters at such moments. While reconstructing the original tale of the Mahabharata written by Sage Vyasa from sociological and anthropological angles, Bhyrappa has given a fictionalised account of its events in a believable way. The present paper attempts to study Bhyrappa's scrutiny of the Mahabharata from the point of view of a modern mind and its retelling as a historical event.

The composition of historical fiction is not an easy task as it is a peculiarly demanding and problematic genre. The writer needs to walk the fine line between history and fiction. As Leon Garfield (1988) has observed, historical fiction was regarded "as being something of an embarrassment, like an elderly relative, to be tolerated out of a sense of duty and reluctantly supported in a condition of genteel poverty". Still there is a tradition of historical fiction in India

as authors have done significant work in this genre successfully grappling with the challenges such type of writing places on them. A few examples of historical fiction based on the Mahabharata in Indian literature are S. Ramakrishnan's *Uba Paandavam* in Tamil, M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham* in Malayalam and Shivaji Savant's *Mrityunjay* in Marathi. In a historical novel, the setting and some of the characters and events are taken from history and the historical milieu and events are elaborately developed as being important to the central narrative. Althea Reed (1994) categorises novels that include historic characters as historic fiction which try to reveal history and the true character of historic figures and differentiates them from historical fiction that does not include historic characters and tries to bring history to life. In this context, *Parva* can be regarded as a historic novel which emphasises the influence of social and economic conditions in its characters and events.

Through Kunti's reminiscences, we come to know about the secrets behind the birth of the Pandavas. She was married to King Pandu but failed to conceive because of his impotence. According to Vyasa's Mahabharata, Pandu had mistakenly killed a sage while hunting and got cursed by him. Bhyrappa explains that Pandu had left for forest in order to cure himself of his impotence. He wanted to contact the Deva community which resided in the Himalayan region and was famous for its exceptional medical knowledge. Pandu was fearful about Dhritarashtra, his elder brother, fathering a child before himself as the kingdom would pass on to the eldest child. In spite of living in the forest he had a comfortable life as there was a regular supply of provisions from Hastinavati. He feared that this supply may be stopped in future as he tells Kunti, "If Dhritarashtra produced children first, we shall be in ruins." (Bhyrappa 75) Pandu decided to use the Niyoga principle and requested the Chief Priest of the Deva community to perform Niyoga on Kunti. Pandu told the Priest, "If the husband is physically impotent or he dies without children, it may be performed on the wife in order to perpetuate his lineage..." (Bhyrappa 76)

Before the beginning of the Kurukshetra war, Krishna convinces Bhima to go to Nimisharanya to enlist the support of Ghatotkacha, the Rakshasa leader and his son from Salkatankati. Bhima is in a dilemma as he has never visited Salkatankati once he had left her after Ghatotkacha's birth. Kunti was responsible for this as she felt that her sons would become indistinguishable from the Rakshasas if they continue to live with them and so had forced them to leave. While leaving in Ekachakranagara Bhima had killed Bakasura to save their patron from the predicament of allowing

a member of his family to become Bakasura's victim. The original story says that Bakasura devoured the person, bullocks and all the food alone but Bhyrappa writes that Bakasura's family and followers used to eat all of them. When Bhima is questioned by Neela, his servant, why he did not become the ruler of Ekachakranagara after killing Bakasura as its King was powerless anyway, Bhima had no answer. He only says that the thought did not occur to him at that time. Now Bhima realises that if Pandavas had become the rulers of Ekachakranagara, "We would have been spared trouble from Duryodhana and wiles. But it never occurred to us then." (Bhyrappa 147)

Arjuna had successfully performed the feat of archery required to win Draupadi's hand during the Swayamvara. The other defeated rulers could not digest this and rushed forward to abduct her. It was Bhima who dislocated a pillar causing the pandal to fall and then all the Pandavas defended Draupadi and brought her back to Kunti. As per the Vyasa version, Kunti unknowingly asked her sons to distribute equally amongst themselves whatever they have brought that day. As her command could not be broken all Pandavas had to marry Draupadi. But Bhyrappa offers a more plausible reason behind this incident. He writes that all the Pandavas were bewitched by Draupadi's beauty and claimed her on the pretext of having defended her from other rulers in the pandemonium after the Swayamvara. To preserve their unity Kunti convinced Draupadi to marry all of them. She tempted Draupadi by suggesting that she will be able to rule over five potent husbands which will give her a marital bliss unenjoyed hitherto by any other woman. Thus Draupadi's collective marriage was a result of her "enthusiasm to rule five husbands with such masculine virtues, and enthusiasm arising out of the expectation of enjoying what no Aryan woman had so far enjoyed". (Bhyrappa 194)

Bhyrappa presents Arjuna as a proud and arrogant person who always justifies his actions one way or the other. He wishes for a war with the Kauravas not only to get back the kingdom but also to show his skill as an archer to the whole of Aryavarta. He says:

Let the war start. I shall dazzle the world with a display of archery never before seen by man. ... Heralds would compose songs about my wizardry in archery and future generations of Kshatriyas would sing those songs in rapture. (Bhyrappa 251)

Thus Arjuna is motivated by ideas of personal ambition and aspiration. When Kichak had tried to molest Draupadi while the Pandavas were spending their year of exile impersonated as ordinary people in the kingdom of Virat, Arjuna was not in favour of immediate retribution. He

reasoned that slaying a mighty warrior like Kichak will arouse the suspicion of Duryodhana. He was more worried about not being found out during the period of incognito exile than saving his wife's honour.

Bhyrappa throws light on Krishna's life and achievements through the reminiscences of Yuyudhana Satyaki, a close friend and follower of Krishna. The myth of Krishna's divinity is analysed and found to be just a hearsay. As Krishna's parents were imprisoned by Kansa, his maternal uncle, he grew up in the household of Nanda, his foster father. Nanda inculcated the belief of his having been born to kill Kansa in Krishna's mind right from his childhood. So Krishna began to believe in it. When he went to Mathura as a youngster, he broke Kansa's old bow which led to people believing in his divinity as Kansa himself had spread the rumour of his bow being indestructible. While fighting with Kansa's elephant, Krishna kept his cool and managed to get the animal dashed against a stone wall thereby killing it. While wrestling with Chanura, the royal wrestler, he used the tactics of tiring him out and then choked him to death. Thus Krishna was a brave warrior, intelligent politician and master strategist but a human being still. When Jarasandha, Kansa's father-in-law, began attacking Mathura in revenge, Krishna realised that his small army stood no chance against a powerful kingdom like Magadha and so advised the people of Mathura to escape and founded a new kingdom far away in Dwaraka safe from Jarasandha's invasion. He had abducted Rukmini, the Vidarbha princess and married her to foil Jarasandha's plan to marry her to Shishupala, his adopted son. Yuyudhana cannot understand the reason of Krishna's having married so many women. He says:

Why should not Krishna be happy and content with one such exemplary wife? What insatiable appetite for women! ... Wherever he went they offered him brides and he married them all. How many women can one man maintain? (Bhyrappa 366)

Krishna spent very little time in Dwaraka probably because of the domestic bickerings among his numerous wives and got himself involved in the politics of the entire Aryan world. Thus even Krishna is shown as having a human frailty. Balarama, Krishna's elder brother, was the king of Dwaraka. But Krishna was offered the first position of honour during the Rajasuya ceremony performed by the Pandavas and he accepted it. Yuyudhana comments, "Yes, yes, Krishna wouldn't hesitate to assert his authority and claim at the right time." (Bhyrappa 395) This probably did not go down well with Balarama. Later, Krishna supported their sister

Subhadra's marriage with Arjuna, opposing Balarama's wish to marry her to Duryodhana, his disciple. As a result Balarama sent the Dwaraka army to Kaurava side during the war against Krishna's wish.

Bhyrappa brings out Karna's dilemma before the beginning of the Kurukshetra war quite clearly. When Krishna realised that the war was inevitable, he disclosed to Karna the secret of his birth by identifying him as the first-born child of Kunti. She had conceived him through sage Durwasa before her marriage with Pandu and given him to Radha, her maidservant to avoid public scandal. Krishna tried to bring Karna to the side of Pandavas as a war strategy. Kunti met Karna and confirmed the truth. Karna questioned her about Draupadi, "She is wife to all the five Pandavas, but now will she accept me as her first husband? Not under your compulsion, but willingly." (Bhyrappa 445) Thus Karna realises that Kunti may convince the Pandavas to accept Karna as their King but Draupadi will never agree to it. He is also worried about the fate of his children and grandchildren who are in Duryodhana's service.

Bhyrappa's *Parva* is a fruit of an extensive research carried out by the writer to ascertain the historicity of the epic after making a thorough study of the original Mahabharata by Vyasa. It is based on a deep study of the political, social, economic and religious conditions during the Vedic times. According to Aravind Adiga, the Kurukshetra war was born out of a clash of competing Dharmas during the later Vedic period when North India was a patchwork of kingdoms, urban centres and tribal communities and the absence of political unity resulted in a multiplicity of ethical systems. Bhyrappa has given a stark picture of the conditions during the war. Duryodhana had demanded extra grain payment from the people of Hastinavati as his army had increased beyond his expectation. So the common people had developed a strong hatred for this war. The garbage and dirt associated with the battlefield is brought out in the following words:

The left-overs of so many men's food was accumulating and rotting and the urine and defecation of so many men had created a veritable hell of unbearable stench. (Bhyrappa 465)

After the war is over, the Pandavas realise that they have not achieved much except great suffering and a terrible vacuum.

The character delineation of Bhyrappa does not correspond to the original characters of Mahabharata because he has tried to peep into the souls of these characters and attempted to understand the reasons and emotions behind their actions from the point of view of human nature and relationships. The original Mahabharata story is full of supernatural occurrences and assigns divinity to certain characters. But Bhyrappa treats all the characters as human beings, comprised of a mixture of good and bad qualities in different proportions. Bhyrappa has tried to gain perspective on society and human condition while exploring human nature through the responses of the notable Mahabharata characters on the problems and issues in their lives in this novel.

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