



The Mahabharata in an age of Twitter: Exploring Chindu Sreedharan's Mythopoeic Imagination in Epic Retold

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ABSTRACT: *The present paper is an attempt to explore the mythopoeic imagination of Chindu Sreedharan who through his retelling of the Mahabharata resists the sacrosanct presentation of the epic narratives. On one hand he creates an alternative mythical world which deconstruct the traditional understanding the epic narratives and on the other hand, he visualizes the contemporary world in a mythic frame. The paper also explores the way Sreedharan has invented a new generic form to wrap up his narrative in order to suit the mood of the readers of the "twitter generation".*

KEY WORDS: *Twitter fiction, Mahabharata, Mythopoeia, Sreedharan, Epic Retold.*

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I. INTRODUCTION

Mythopoeia is the act of creating myth. J.A. Cuddon sees it as the "conscious creation of myth. In literature, [it is] the appropriation and reworking of mythical material, or the creation of a kind of 'private' mythology" (454). The mythopoeic writers like Chindu Sreedharan, through their conscious creation of myth, resist the sacrosanct nature of the traditional myths and epic narratives. The characters and situations in those narratives are seen in new lights and from new, often marginalized, perspectives. So what they do is basically a "re-telling" of the epics where the process of "telling" itself works as a kind of "agency" for the marginalized. What leads to such retellings is an author's "revisionist approach" towards an existing text. As an author is the product of "race, milieu and moment" (Wikipedia.org), the change in the social and cultural context leads to the change in the author's ideology. This is an inevitable "agon", as Harold Bloom would call it, a continuous battle between the "tradition and "the individual talent" (Anatomy 16). However, paradoxical it may seem but "agon is not a resistance to artistic creativity but a "friendly transmission" of literary influences (Anatomy 21).

Chindu Sreedharan, a journalist turned academician, teaches journalism at Bournemouth University, England. Hardly an expertise in the field of the Mahabharata Studies, Sreedharan's profession equipped him with the knowledge of the politico-economical phenomena and developments influencing human lives throughout the globe like migration, transnational activities, terrorism, racial discrimination, gender rights, wars, environmental degradation, economic inflation and deflation and so on. So in a way he seems to make a statement and generate an ideology of his own as response to such phenomena through his mythopoeic venture. The Mahabharata becomes secondary poetic space for the exploration of such individual response which seems to be the primary task here.

Bhima, the second Pandava, is the "focalizer" in Sreedharan's Epic Retold. Therefore, the events and the characters in the text are described from his point-of-view. The opening establishes Bhima, the third Pandava, as a marginal being as he is considered by all fat, slow and stupid. He is often made fun of by Kaurava brothers and even by Yudhisthira. Bhima possesses tremendous strength and so his strength needs to be curbed for the advantage of others. By rendering him stupid and unintelligent, Bhima is made to believe that he needs to be dependent upon others as far as decision-making is concerned. He may be strong but he needs to learn the application of such strength, failing of which can lead to the massive destruction. This fear and anxiety regarding the control of this massive source of strength takes the form of ridicule and castigation. Sreedharan's Bhima discovers this later in the book when Kunti confesses, "They laughed at you. Called you the fool, the idiot. But it was you Dritarashtra feared the most" (Sreedharan 276). Even Yudhisthira himself is no exception in this regard. Yudhisthira knows well that he can become king only if he can manipulate and channelize Bhima's strength. Therefore, he too ridicules and castigates Bhima thereby forcing him to follow his instruction.

The suspension of the reason in the person to be controlled is important as it makes the control over that person easier. Bhima therefore is forced to concentrate on the development of his physical strength though that is not considered something important in comparison to that of chariots or bow and arrow: "In his (Kripacharya) eyes, Yudhisthira excels with chariots, Arjuna with bow and arrow. Me? I am only good to wrestle or fight with the mace" (Sreedharan 16). Rendering him insignificant and good for nothing is also meant for curbing his strength. So, on the one hand he is trained in wrestling with a view to making him emerge as a "hyper-masculine" protector-warrior while, on the other hand, his confidence over his strength and his reasoning capability are always necessarily undermined.

When Reza's Bhima in B.R. Chopra's Mahabharat embraces such chauvinistic "configuration" (YouTube) of the society with utmost obedience, Sreedharan's Bhima always resists those formations. He always tries to do something he likes and he does not care even going against the wishes of the elders. Instead of becoming a thoughtless wrecking machine, Bhima chooses to become a "man" with emotion, sympathy, feelings and intelligence. His outlook to life is humanitarian. It is characterized by innocence and simplicity. In Bhima's narration the charioteer Visoka emerges almost as a heroic character guiding and supporting him throughout his life. Bhima is outspoken and often critical of the actions and decisions of his elders.

Though Kripacharya and Dronacharya decided that he would only practice with the mace, Bhima "vow[s] to practice even harder, determined more than ever to master all forms of combat" (Sreedharan 30) and the person who is going to help him in this regard is Visoka, a charioteer. Soon, Bhima realizes that Visoka is not an ordinary charioteer but a brilliant "strategist" who is adept at all forms of combat. For Bhima, Visoka is the real teacher whom he reveres more than Dronacharya and Kripacharya. His resistance to Dronacharya's ideological "teaching" comes to the full view on the day of "THE EXHIBITION" when he enters the exhibition hall charioted by Visoka and performs marvelous feats with bow and arrows at Visoka's instruction much to the surprise of everyone which obviously infuriates Dronacharya.

So, on one hand, Bhima is reputed as an emblem of "hyper-masculinity" while on the other he embodies a more "effeminate" and subordinated form of masculinity and Bhima's constant struggle to negotiate between these two "selves" is what Sreedharan's text is all about. But in most cases, Bhima's subordinated side gets restricted within the parameter of his internal monologues only. Despite his direct verbal protest throughout the text Bhima fails to save himself from being a "pawn" in a larger ideological game for power.

Bhima's conflict is first seen on the exhibition day when Karna was not allowed to fight with Arjuna and humiliated for his low birth. A fight ensues between Kauravas and the Pandavas when Drona declared the competition over. Bhima justifies that he feels pity for Karna. But he also believes in what he has been "taught": "No mercy for the enemy, I remind myself, no second chance. 'The whip suits you better than the bow, Karna, I shout. 'But I will fight any charioteer who wants to play warrior'" (Sreedharan 37).

Reza's Bhima perfectly plays the role of a "monk warrior" performing heroic feats on the one hand by killing Hidimba and Baka as they restrict the passage to their goal to restore "dharma" and on the other by marrying Hidimbi to produce his own progeny. Reza's Bhima stays with Hidimbi only for one year, till the birth of Ghatotkacha. Once the progeny is born Bhima's task with Hidimbi is complete and he leaves after filling Hidimbi's mind with the ideological definition of a great mother that the latter should concentrate on becoming. Again, at the prospect of sharing Draupadi, Bhima is momentarily surprised but obediently accepts Yudhisthira's argument for marrying her. Sreedharan's Bhima fails to understand at first that everything including his marriage to Hidimbi and the marriage of Draupadi is a part of the statecraft which Kunti, Yudhisthira, Vidura and Krishna have designed. Naturally, as an appointed "militant" of this statecraft, he is always kept in darkness about the plans and the political moves. But Sreedharan's Bhima fails to discharge his assigned duty as eagerly as Reza's Bhima. Sreedharan's Yudhisthira calculated the days and the nights to be spent with Draupadi by each of the Pandavas. Yudhisthira ensures that he is the first to go to Panchali and also the one who can spend most of the time in a year. But Bhima fails to think about Panchali or to go to her. He vehemently protests against the sharing of Arjuna's wife. He is always thinking about his Hidimbi. Bhima thinks that Yudhisthira is responsible for all the wrongs happened to them- the killing of the tribal people, Bhima's separation with Hidimbi and the marriage of Draupadi to the five brothers. As a sign of protest Bhima leaves for the forest where he had left Hidimbi. Failing to meet Hidimbi, a lovelorn Bhima comes to Kashi and marries Balandhara, sister of the King of Kashi, as it can be "[A]n alliance good for Indraprastha" (Sreedharan 74). But Bhima marries Balandhara not out of any "pragmatism" but to seek an emotional refuge in "A Hidimbi in finery".

Bhima's narration explicitly reveals the "imperial" motif behind the burning of the Khandava forest: "Seeing me look at the burnt landscape, Sahadeva says, 'Oh, that's Arjuna's doing! He and Krishna cleared the forests one day!' What about the tribes who lived there? The Nagas and the rest? 'Some agreed to move here and work for us. The others ran away when we began setting fire to the forests!'" (Sreedharan 80). Bhima is introduced to Mayan, an architect who is saved by Arjuna from the fire and he "agreed" to build a great hall for

Yudhistira to discuss statesmanship. He also makes weapons for the Pandavas. According to Iravati Karve the burning of the Khandava was one of the earliest "holocaust"[s] in the history of human civilization (57).

The battle of Kurukshetra is the actual "akahara" [gymnasium] (translation mine) into which Bhima and men like him are "configured" to perform. Bhima soon understands that they are merely "pawns" to be sacrificed in the ideological war between "righteousness" and "unrighteousness". However, as the war starts the difference between righteousness and unrighteousness diminishes and what manifests is a mad pursuit for power and personal revenge. Sreedharan's text severely criticizes the idea of war and warriorhood. In the battle of Kurukshetra the progenies appear one by one to help the fathers they have only met in heroic imagination. Bhima realizes that if war is a "duty" for the old, it is a play for youths like Abhimanyu, "a game". Sreedharan's war narration de-romanticizes the image of Krishna and presented him as a composed but shrewd politician who plans all the war-strategies for the Pandavas. Karna had preserved a special weapon to use against Arjuna. By sending Ghatotkacha to the front, Krishna indirectly forces Karna to spend the special weapon on Ghatotkacha who cannot be defeated easily. Therefore, "...Ghatotkacha's death calls for celebration, not mourning!..." 'Why do you think I asked Ghatotkacha to face Karna? His ultimate weapon is gone! Would you rather risk your brother than the forester?'" (Sreedharan 238), says Krishna to Yudhistira. The outcome of the Great War turns out to be entirely futile as Ashwathma sets the Pandava camps to fire and kills everyone including Dhristadhyumna. Bhima, the warrior, mourns heavily: "Is this what we fought for? I sink on to the sand under the crushing weight of our victory" (Sreedharan 268).

In Sreedharan's Epic Retold, Bhima's marginalization is not only about his failure to provide an outlet to his own subordinated masculine self characterized by innocence, simplicity, sympathy, emotion and boundless love; it is not merely about being humiliated as a fat buffoon, a blockhead through the whole of his life by everyone including his own family members or being a pawn in an ideological game of power; it is as much about his being kept in darkness about his own parentage which initiates Bhima's lifelong search for his true identity. Since childhood, like Karna, Bhima has always been insulted by Duryodhana and others for his ambiguous parentage. Even the palace maids address him as "Vayuputra". Bhima never gets to know either from Kunti or from anyone else who his father is. Visoka's revelation that Karna is his elder brother and his tragic demise in the hands of Arjuna, his own brother compels Bhima to press Kunti harder to reveal the truth: "...Who are we really? I must know. Who is my father?'" (Sreedharan 275). Kunti's answer astounded Bhima:

Karna was born before Hastinapur. When I lived with the sage. A difficult man, he burnt like the sun at the slightest lapse....Pandu wanted a son who would be a great king. Who would be intelligent, know the Vedas and be well versed in statecraft. I accepted Vidura for that purpose....Pandu wanted a strong son. Someone to protect the kingdom. Someone powerful like Vaayu, the God of Wind...There was someone. A giant, blessed with the strength of a thousand elephants'....When realization dawns on me, I stagger back. Is Mother telling me the blind man who I could not bear to see, the one responsible for everything, is my real father? (Sreedharan 276).

Kunti also confides why Drona has always been partial to Arjuna. Arjuna is his son. One of the influences behind Sreedharan's Epic Retold is S. L. Bhyrappa's Parva which too describes the Pandavas not as the sons of gods. Kunti begets them through "niyoga" with humans, "the leaders and chiefs of the land of Devas" (150). According to Iravati karve, "It was customary then to acquire a son begotten by another man on one's own wife, if one happened not to have an heir. This was called 'niyoga' and was considered a method superior to adoption" (189). She also speaks of the possibility of Yudhistira being fathered by Vidura (74-78). Indrajit Bandyopadhyay also argues that Yudhistira is the son of Vidura but he thinks that Bhima and Arjuna are born of Kindama and Pandu respectively ("The Mystery of the Pandava God-Fathers"). Sreedharan's liberal "extrapolation" in introducing Dritarashtra as Bhima's father is simply the result of various possibilities regarding the Pandava parentage as explored by various scholars. The cult of "niyoga" shows the detached manner of liaison between men and women. As the focus was simply on producing more and more warriors in the service of the nation, naturally the men and women were no less than catalysts in the process of such production having no emotional bond with each other or with their progenies. The revelation of his parentage changes the meaning of everything Bhima has done so far. It changes the course of his life as he drops his decision to retire to Hidimbi in the forest and returns to Hastinapur.

However, this alternative creation of the mythical world is one facet of modern mythopoeia. The other feature includes the vision of the contemporary world in mythic terms as Michael Bell describes (2). It becomes a tactic of the modern writers to demonstrate their own worldview in the form of a myth and thereby maintaining an ironical detachment. Supriya Chaudhuri has shown how the trauma of the working class individuals in metropolitan cities in the twentieth century Bengal suffering alienation and exile found expression in the novels of Samaresh Basu, Bimal Kar, Shirshendu Mukhopadhyay and others (120). Samaresh Basu's Samba (1980), based on the character of the son of Lord Krishna, presented such metropolitan issues in a mythical frame. This same idea is evoked once again through Sreedharan's text. Bhima is not only a character reimagined, he is also an emblem of the introvert, claustrophobic, thoughtful youths of the "twitter generation"

who seek refuge in the world of social networking sites and whose meditative speculations are more confident than their actions. Naturally, no traditional narrative form or genre is capable to compliment such meditative speculations. Sreedharan therefore discovered a new genre known as flash fiction. Flash Fiction denotes a fictional work of extreme brevity. Often it includes Six-Word story, One Hundred and Forty Characters Stories (called "Twitterature" or Twitter Fiction), dribble (50 words), drabble (500 words) and Sudden Fiction (750 words). Sreedharan posted the entire fiction on twitter in the form of small tweets each containing one hundred and forty characters. As initially the text was meant to be posted on Twitter, Sreedharan took special care in developing a narrative technique which suits his purpose. Conforming to Twitter's focus on "NOW moments" (Sreedharan 4) Bhima's narration occurs mostly in time present with some occasional "flashbacks". Just like a netizen who posts his/her activities or any events on social networking sites with a sense of immediacy, Bhima's is a "concurrent" narration and so he tells as soon as he experiences. Sreedharan highlights the personal nature of Twitter and therefore develops a "character- driven story- what the Bulgarian literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov calls psychological narrative" (Sreedharan 3) to facilitate a communication between his central character and the readers.

Again, the fast and furious life in the metropolis requires a fiction which would provide them with immediate aesthetic pleasure and Sreedharan's text communicate that pleasure to the readers very well. The text is itself innovative as it is more of about "texting" than "writing" where the former is less time consuming, immediate and full of brevity. Therefore, Sreedharan raises the issue of genre, medium and readership and the way they are undergoing rapid changes conforming to the changing global scenario. As far as the Mahabharata is concerned, it is continuously having a dialogue with cultures since time immemorial. It is changing them gradually and is getting changed in return. This is how it always retained its contemporaneity and will do so in times to come as well.

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