

Polyphony as Political Exercise: Reading Retelling of Epic Characters

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Abstract

Attempts have been made in retelling Epics Ramayana and Mahabharata from the very inception of these works. Both epics are a reflection of Indian society. The retelling of epics also implies a political analysis and cultural analysis of the nation. The fascinating things about the retelling are that they give voices to the silenced characters, echoes the suppressed voices of the marginalised and peripheral people. Such reading of fiction based on the Epics invites us to engage in the politics of the text. The diversity of the voices found in the novels reminds the reader of the theories of Bakhtin. Each voice is valid, according to Bakhtin. While reading the retelling of Epic Characters, the reader finds the silenced men and women in the original text have found their voices in the present retelling. Bakhtinian theory of polyphony and heteroglossia can be used to analyse the politics of the past and present. Therefore this paper proposes polyphony as means of the socio-political analysis of the retelling of epics.

Keywords: Polyphony, Politics, Bakhtin, Heteroglossia.

INTRODUCTION

India's fleet of publishing companies invests in fiction and other literary works depicting Mahabharata and Ramayana characters. The last two decades witnessed the publication of novels and other literary works, most of which became best-sellers for a while. The characteristics of such publications can be divided into two categories: those that emphasise the glory and pompousness of epic while maintaining its socio-cultural practices; and those that challenge and question those practices by reshaping and remoulding characters. The first is an easy job, portraying the epic heroes as models and venerable, thus urging the readers to adhere to such a system and culture. Imposing and maintaining class and cast divisions began at an early period. The second is a process of struggle, inserting differing voices, challenging the values of the heroes of the epics, dethroning them, and crowning the so-called villains as heroes. This mode of retelling gives voices to the silent characters and echoes the suppressed voices of the marginalised and peripheral people. Such descriptions allow a multiplicity of voices, which invariably did not qualify in the narration of the epic. Fanini opines that "the polyphonic-oriented novelistic discourse aesthetically formalises an ideal linguistic stage in which dissent, doubleness, and inconclusiveness are the only possible reality" (33). Having dissented, opening differences of opinion, and finding a secondary reality are some of the features of the retelling of the epics. This kind of work becomes a political exercise in the current national context, where polyphony and differences of opinion are considered a crime. Such circumstances compel us to reread and reconsider the epics. These publications invariably resonate with the Bakhtinian literary theories of polyphony and heteroglossia.

Bakhtin's studies of Dostoevsky's novel delineate his theory of the novel. Most readers and critiques tend to follow a pattern of the singularity of consciousness when approaching a text. Such an approach reaches up to a single vision of reality, whereas in Bakhtin's understanding of Dostoevsky's novels, mutually exclusive differences "that combine towards a high unity, a second unity called polyphony(16). It is understood that singular vision or consciousness is not always the basis of reading a text; rather, an approach of plurality, contradictions, and inconclusiveness to the text may bring a socio-political consciousness to the text. Bakhtin believes that every character is independent and has a good voice to agree or disagree with the author and the system. It also means that the heroes of the text may run out of the intentions of the author. Bakhtin's perspectives on polyphony include "a plurality of fully valid voices within the limits of a single work" (Bakhtin 34). In the polyphonic designs, Bakhtin

insists on the characters' self-consciousness that surpasses the author's grip. "Selfconsciousness. . . is by itself sufficient to break down the monologic unity of an artistic world"(51). On the monologic discourse, Fanini opines that "[it] ... is built from an authoritarian, exclusivistic, definitive and closed attitude about language" (Fanini 25). This position imposes certain social beliefs like "the identity of one single national language; the homogeneity of popular culture; the correct interpretation of a text; right reading; objectivity and superiority in scientific language; proper translation and good literature"(26). Being these are the features of monologic discourse, one can find an altogether different dialogic concept of the novel. For Bakhtin, the dialogic nature of language is plural and historical, promoting various meanings and readings. Dialogism represents the entire social world, open to many worlds, all equally valid and unfinalizable. Eigler points out that dialogised language is not completely the product of the author's intentions "but a result of the "heteroglossia", i.e., the language that constitutes the author's particular socio-historical context" (191).

To understand the dialogism of Bakhtin, one has to familiarise with the concepts Bakhtin discusses under dialogism; Polyphony, unfinalizability, prosaic, carnivalesque, chronotop, heteroglossia and homotopy. These concepts under dialogism are important for critiquing the retelling of epics in Indian fiction. Polyphony is heterogeneous, as stated earlier, or collaboration and participation in the reformation of the socio-cultural state of the nation. Unfinalizability, inferring from Bakhtin's concepts, generates change, even if only a little, and gives birth to something new, which is positive. The idea of unfinalizability leads to the carnival. The very concept of the carnival itself is restricted to the opposition to the official, serious side related to power and authority. The underbelly folk enjoy the festive laughter linking themselves to market place, the lower stratum of society. Bakhtin's practices of carnival place in "a completely different, nonofficial, extra-ecclesiastical and extra-political aspect of the world, of man, and human relations". In his essay 'Forms of Time and the Chronotope in the Novel', Bakhtin explains the concept of chronotope in terms of 'intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that obtain within each genre (Bakhtin, 84). Extropy is outsideness. It would mean relationships with other or otherness. For Bakhtin, language is socially constructed; each utterance has social values, depending on other utterances. A single sentence can generate other utterances. All these concepts singled out as dialogism or polyphony underline his theory of the novel. The novel, for him, is contrasted with other genres. He identifies the novel as a genre capable of cherishing variety, " as a diversity of social speech types (sometimes even diversity of languages) and a diversity of individual voices, artistically organised" (262). He formulates such concepts against his understanding of epic. Epic is " "ready-made," "fully finished", and "completed" (34).

In this context, the researcher argues that the retelling of the completed text (epics) as a novel with maximal contact with the present with all its "openendedness" (11) resembles the contemporary social and political problems we experience currently. A close reading of the retellings of the epics "denies the absolutism of a single and unitary language" (366) and thus brings new perspectives of retrospection and assessment of the current political system. Mohanty, in his article *The Mahabharata: A reading in Political Structuring*, opines that the epic moved from communal religious practices to the hierarchy of social order integrating the four varnas of Brahman, Kshatriya, Vaisya and Sudra towards a semblance of governance in the kingdoms and finally to a federal system of political administration. He observes that establishing the federal system eventually leads to political administration and war games. The political war games are seen in both epics. It is not surprising that the authoritative voice of the kings and masters in the epic is complete and closed. However, when it comes to the fictional retelling of the epics, as stated in the introduction, there is a surfacing of the minor or marginalised voices – Polyphony - that gives new dimensions to the political power games. Epics express single consciousness, whereas polyphonic narrative implies that the unity of several consciousnesses is interdependent. This multi-consciousness is the distinctive feature of the retelling of the epics.

The epics are socially and culturally significant for India. Compared to Ramayana, where the characters are more of divine quality than the other epic, Mahabharata is more closely related to the workings of society and human behaviour. In his essay titled 'Repetitions in the Mahabharata', Ramanujan writes "a text like the Mahabharata is not a text but a tradition" (420). This tradition is overtly connected with the social, cultural and political system of India. Debroy writes on Mahabharata, "every conceivable human emotion figures in it, which is the reason why it is possible to identify with it even today. The text itself states that what is not found in the Mahabharata will not be found anywhere else". Same is the case with Ramayana. All those fictions published based upon Ramayana is the retelling of the text we already knew. As Richman observes, Ramayana is a text that is "multivoiced entity, encompassing telling of the Rama story that varies according to historical period, regional literary tradition, religious affiliation, genre, and political context" (Richman 16). It is considered that both epics are Ithihasa in the Indian context. Ithihasa is neither fiction nor myth. Debroy writes, "... ithihasa is better translated as 'this is what happened. Ithihasa is not myth or fiction. It is a chronicle of what happened; it is a fact. Or so runs the belief." An approach to these epics has been a disputed one. While some considered it a myth, many scholars and, alternatively, historians considered it part of Indian history and the culture of people living in India, to the contentment of many, retelling these epics that re-contextualise characters and stories in the modern history of literature. While discussing the myth and contemporary literature, Michael Bell opines about the historical significance of the myth as a fundamental foundational story of a nation or culture. For him, myth is both reality and falsehood; used relatively as one man's belief is another man's myth.

The number of books published on Epics is increasing day by day. Myth and epic embody beliefs and philosophies that gave birth to the socio-political ideology in nation-building. Epic literature has an imperative say even in the current political system of India. In his article, *Modern retelling of Indian Myths A Study of Rehashing Mythology Through popular fiction*, Vikram Singh underlines that the stories are retold because of an interest in or fascination for the mythical past; they also consist of commentaries on the present sociopolitical situation. The attempts of retelling these epics are writing back to centre, re-contextualising and reversing the hegemony of voices, or giving importance to the multivoiced so far silenced in the epics. Thus, the authors try to bring polyphony to the retelling of epics. In *Bakhtin's Carnival: Utopia and Critique*, Micheal Gardiner asserts, in tune with Bakhtin, that the epic world is invariably set in a mythical heroic past in a monological hierarchy. Reliability and open-endedness are absent in the epic monologue. The Bakhtinian reading of the epics is closely related to the natural diversity of India. As Lakshmi Bandalmudi observes in the proceedings of the conference, (Bakhtin's) idea has greater relevance in India's multilingual, multicultural, and multireligious status as Bakhtin's work stands under plurality openendedness, diversity of language in social speech types.

The retellings of epics are multivoiced or hypertextual as each statement carries a relationship with other matters that existed before or after. This hypertext itself provides readers with any path or accurate reading. Each text is multivocal without the imposition of univocal. Unlike Epics that impose univocally, the retellings stand different with their purposeful adaptation of dialogic approach. The Bakhtinian polyphonic theory has an undercurrent with the retelling of the epics as they are retold from the perspectives of various minor and major characters. For example, Anand Neelakantan's novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished Ravana and his People* (2012) narrates the story of Ramayana from the perspective of Ravana, the villain of Valmiki's Ramayana. He also details the minor character, Bhadra elaborately as a typical Indian to the politicians. *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* Epic of the Kauravas Clan I is from the narration of Mahabharata from the part of Duryodhana. Mahasweta Devi's story *The Five Women* displays the women mostly silenced and neglected and gives a new approach to the epic. The refreshing polyphonic representation is unique to the epic readings. It shows the resistance to the monologic and hierarchical order of the epic.

Bakhtinian reading of retelling of epics also implies a political analysis and cultural analysis of the nation. Many of the retellings of these epics have been used for portraying various aspects of current political status. Shashi Tharoor's fiction *The Great Indian Novel* and other novelists are some of them. Each of these representations of epic details politics of difference in many ways. Diverse India cannot digest the univocal or hegemonic utterances as its only voice. However, the socio-political ambience of India demands the heteroglossia, carnival, polyphony, exotopy, and chronotop to be included in socio-political and literary criticism. It would also mean that each retelling is not an adherence to a single consciousness, but instead, they register differences and generate dialogical dynamics among themselves. The polyphonic theory aims to mobilise the text, to redetermine its connections with history by serving its existing articulations and forging new ones, actively politicising the process of reading.

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