

them, we may not put in jeopardy that which made that construction and deconstruction possible—thought's responsibility to itself, the ethics of thinking if you will. Thinking must always exhibit openness to difference, as yet unthought thought. But it must also respect what exists beyond the pale of thought.

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Stories Within and Tales Outside: *Mahabharata* Retold

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Stories from the great Indian epic *Mahabharata* remain of perennial interest and have been retold in contemporary times in different ways and from varying perspectives. The oral tales that accumulated into epic dimensions as they travelled through the centuries through narration, performance, interpolations, additions, deletions, assume highly original and unique forms as they challenge the introspective mind of the individual writer in contemporary times. I plan to take up four such works to give an indication of the kind of response that can be evoked when the oral performed tales (part of collective memory) are confronted with the introspective and individual writing self. Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*¹ is a poem that looks at the *Mahabharata* times retrospectively from the point of view of the Nagas even as Janamejaya's *Sarpa Yajna* is being

performed. It is a subaltern reading that inverts the Brahmanical foundations and elitist orientation of the Meta text. It maintains the dramatic speaking voice of a character with a narrative continuity leading to an expected action, a story line. Jaraatkaru speaks to her son Aastika, trying to tell him that he can be the saviour of the Nagas as he is half human. But there is also a hidden narrative where the individual poet communicates with a contemporary reader through the written word read in silence. Contemporary social and political events, innate human tendencies peep through this other story that lies implicit within. Shaoli Mitra's *Nathaboti Anathboth*² in contrast is not a poem to be read in silence. It continues the performative, narrative oral tradition of the *Mahabharata*. But the Suta here is a woman who subverts the essentially male

narrative from the female point of view. She is a female and she sees the events and characters from the mega epic from the point of view of Draupadi. Again we have a text retold from a neglected perspective. Her apparent rustic innocence is a performative and narrative strategy that disguises a very contemporary urban feminist point of view. Next I will look into Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*³, which uses autobiographical narration of the events leading to the great war and its consequences from the intense and introspective perspective of Karna. Sawant's empathy with Karna's character comes out in a narrative that perfectly blends authorial concerns and the demands of fiction in a brilliant subjective portrayal of one of the most tragic characters of the great epic. Finally, I take up Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel*⁴ which transfers the epic

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into the realm of contemporary politics and society, converting it into a novel of mock epic and satiric dimensions, where he plays on the reader's ability to read the characters of recent politicians and social figures reincarnated from the epic characters.

I take these four texts as representative. Some of the predominant features of experimental contemporary writing and theatrical expression get showcased through these texts. One of the major shifts that the modern age witnessed was the shift from the collective communal and externalized orientation of oral literary traditions to the personalized individualistic and internalized ways of written literary expression. Even traditional literary texts of such definitive and final impact as the *Mahabharata* get to be seen in hitherto unseen ways. History gets rewritten in creative ways and from neglected points of view. Poetry emerges that imagines narratives that were left unspoken. A theatre is created that shifts from the known actions of the characters, to an introspectively performed narrative making the established notions of character and plot do a headstand. A mock epic gets written as a comprehensive novel winking mischievously at the miraculous and magical events embedded in the grand epic. At the same time it brings within its all encompassing epic-span, contemporary political and social events and eminently recognizable personalities, as if the story is still continuing. Even when a universalized gendered perspective is rendered, it springs out of an intense personal and individual woman's response. Even when a generalized dalit reading is made, it reveals the diehard irreverence of an individual contemporary poet questioning Brahmanical stupidities that were (and still are) glorified and idolized. The tragic fate of a sidelined major character gets so embedded into the psyche of a modern writer that he has to exorcise the ghost through the writing of an autobiographical fiction.

Sarpa Satra begins innocently as

Janamejaya's narrative proclamation of his planned action against the Nagas, the snake people as they are called in a deceptively simple transcreation. The Nagas were people and not snakes! And seen from contemporary perspective, their version of the well-known historical event never got its due. Much of contemporary historiography is based on excavating and collecting the lost and ignored versions of a past that has been constructed, narrated and envisioned with the interests of races, classes and castes in positions of power. Even the nation as we know today is built on the basis of such narratives. Epics of the dimension of *Mahabharata* (as against the doctored and sanctioned history fed to the masses) thankfully contain bristling counter indicators that only need to be explored to arrive at buried tragedies, hopes, ideas and values of people sidelined in the march of the so-called greater History. Yet, the voice of the snake people coming at this time is not something unique and completely original in itself. We have seen the flip side of the story too as the upward mobility of the Backward Classes, Scheduled Castes/Tribes, Dalits, has revealed through the ugly face of political interest and power gains. We have in a way entered into the backlash of the so-called romanticized subaltern histories of a few decades back. But Kolatkar's narrative introduces several subtexts that are of more enduring interest. With the Nanavati Commission report just out, the assassination of Parikshit echoes other political assassinations of revenge and the subsequent unleashing of retributory action as Janamejaya's massacre of the Naga's: 'I hear they actually distributed sweets/in Bhogawati/when my father died.' Kolatkar's narrative, if it has to be seen as one of enduring interest, has to be cleaned of its romanticization as subaltern history, and seen as an exposition of the eternal hypocrisies, false grandeur, greed and insensitivity that is inherent in the politics of power and wealth. The hitherto subjugated voice of the snake people as it comes out through

Jaraatkaru, becomes the valid voice for this exposition. But it is one thing to expose the greed and clamour for power of the Brahmins and the use of Kshatriya force for mindless violence. It is another thing to be able to avoid the trap of narrative power. We can notice how the subaltern can get carried away through narrative power (Kolatkar gives it to Jaraatkaru, here) when Jaraatkaru attacks the basic premise of the grand epic at its very foundation...that too under the garb of vicious humour. The irreverence that marks the onset of the contemporary mind and of post-modern literature is used here to deconstruct the basic premise of the *Mahabharata*, the reverence for the author that holds the narrative of the great Veda Vyasa. I will quote at length to show how Kolatkar does it. I personally enjoyed it every bit even before I realized the tremendous destructive force that it carried. Just as one accuses a journalist or photographer in contemporary times, who would rather use an opportunity to get a wonderful footage of an event than try to prevent it by active intervention, Vyasa is accused of being a passive and detached observer who could have altered the events and prevented the great war: 'And the heart sinks/when you realize that even someone/like the great Vyasa himself/looks upon the event, (sarpa yajna)/essentially as a not to be missed opportunity/to unleash his self indulgent epic/on an unsuspecting world...But what did you expect of/an old man/who saw it as no part of his business/to interfere, let alone try/to stop/the madness of his grandchildren/from getting completely out of hand/who let it run/its full course to the inevitable/tragic ending...instead of being ashamed of the whole saga/and his own role in it,/or trying to forget it all,/quietly set out/to put the whole wretched chronicle/in black and white/and in polished verse/to the eternal shame of/posterity.'

But oh! He would have lost his wonderful story. Not only him, but we (including Kolatkar) would have been

deprived of a meta text of tremendous literary and existential worth. Seen from the point of view of the underdog, Jaraatkaru's view is justified. But Vyasa was a hermit, and detached from the world of socio-political action. If all writers/storytellers became activists involved with the ongoing action that would be the end of all great literature. This paradox is inherent as a subtext in Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*. But Jaratkaru's narrative does add several new and original dimensions. For example there is the exhortation exposing the hypocrisy of certain classes and castes that use a disaster situation for selfish ends. Just as the oblique reference to the aftermath of Indira Gandhi's assassination, this also rings of contemporary politics. Even as the *Sarpa Yajna* is being planned to eliminate the Nagas from the face of the earth, a certain class is maneuvering and manipulating to determine 'who will bag the contract for constructing/the sacrificial township'. There is another caste that is 'worried about just one thing/how to wangle a job for themselves/as officiating priests' and who will 'manage' 'to land the plum job/of officiating priest' and get the 'blank cheque'.

Another fabulous innovation in the narrative is the commentary on the destruction of the Khandava forest by Arjuna and Krishna. It will have a tremendous appeal in the modern times, with all the environment consciousness that has assumed almost faddist proportions. Yes, Veda Vyasa did get carried away in his imaginative construction of the power that Arjuna and Krishna together represented. Maybe the forest cover at that time was such that the wiping out of an entire forest did not have that alarming a connotation as we find today. After all when the maharajas shot tigers and black bucks, they roamed around in such plenitude that it was all in good spirit and sport. But not today! Thus, when Jaraatkaru (like Veda Vyasa) gets carried away by her newly acquired narrative power (granted so ably by Kolatkar), she magnificently uses it to

reveal the ways in which the upper/elite caste and class, intoxicated with power, can indulge in mindless destruction with devastating consequences for the future: 'Arjuna, the great superhero...received divine weapons...God knows what happened to him, /...Just went berserk, I guess/...He burnt down one of the largest/rainforests in the land/...Reduced it completely/to ash/...He was aided in this crime/by another./A crosscousin of his,/a crony since childhood/... Five thousand different kinds of butterflies/ and a golden squirrel found nowhere else/...trees.../ hundred and hundreds of years old/...a wealth/ of medicinal plants/...nothing was left, not a trace/...people Aastika/people as well./Simple folk,/children of the forest/...gone without a trace./ With their languages/...they just couldn't wait/ to test their awesome powers.' Tragic, is it not? But this is about the best part of the poem. On the one hand it is a comment on contemporary politics of power in the nuclear age. On the other it is an invective on some basic and eternal human traits that can lead to disaster of epic proportions. It is a different kind of warning from the one given by Veda Vyasa through his *Mahabharata*. It is a warning that can only be given when the underdog speaks, when a child of the forest speaks. Kolatkar's strategy is to fictionally assume that voice.

Nathboti Ananthbot (hitherto referred to as NA in the text) bears the imprint of an intriguing multidimensionality. I had the advantage of seeing the performance before reading the written text (the written text was published after the success of the performance). Though reference is made to Irawati Karve by the 'Kathak Thakuran' with the dramatic respect due from a simple folk story teller (a woman here) for a learned scholar whose work opened her eyes empathically to Draupadi's tragic situation, the performative narrative is reminiscent of Teejan Bai's Pandavani style. The preface, in the form of a subjective communication to the reader, clarifies the multiple

perspectives. Shaoli Mitra writes that her father Shambhu Mitra presented Karve's *Yuganta* to her. It was after reading Karve's text that Mitra felt the necessity to create a Kathak Thakuran, a woman like herself who wanted to tell a story. The story of Draupadi attracts Mitra because Draupadi represents the tragic suffering of women through the ages, continuing till date. Interestingly, Mitra says that the key line to the narrative came to her in the form of a refrain: 'some story my very being wants to tell', [(*'kichhu kotha bolte chae je mon'*) (all translations done by me)] and the need for music, poetry, song and dance followed. She admits that it was after the initial production of NA that she discovered the magic of Teejan Bai and other folk artists. When I saw the production, I had the distinct impression that I was watching in proscenium theatre a narrative that blends the intellectual content of contemporary feminine consciousness with the style of folk narrative (Teejan Bai contemporized). This statement of Shaoli Mitra's, thus came as a surprise. She makes this statement perhaps to highlight a fascinating point. The point is: 'then who was it that made me do this work in the way in which I did it (all translations mine). Do the roots of our rich inheritance work in such ways within us?' There are several important points that emerge from this vital statement. Gourkrishna Ghosh has observed in his introduction, the fascinating multidimensionality: 'She is Shaoli and she is Draupadi...she the kathakthakuran and she is the queen Draupadi.' This fluidity of identity raises important questions about contemporary narrative strategies, as one moves from the oral epic/folk tradition of a community narrative as superstructure, to the individualistic and introspective smaller narratives creating and foregrounding neglected and contemporary strains out of the superstructure. Karve's portrayal of Draupadi prepared the intellectual grounds for seeing the epic, its episodes and characters, from a vital perspective of a woman. But Karve's is a written text born out of her own meditations on the

Mahabharata. It kindles a fire in the mind of a woman reader and takes shape in her meditative introspective mind. Note that more than Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, it is this new written text that created this response. An interesting thing happens hereafter. That which is inside the mind wants to find expression. This expression finds its shape in the form of a refrain that is poetic and lyrical and almost sings itself into being: 'some story my very being wants to tell.' As the refrain fills itself out, the story emerges, taking the shape of dance, songs, narration, *abhinaya*, in its fullest paralinguistic quality. The writing is only to ensure that what comes out is not forgotten. Shaoli Mitra says: 'it is for the sake of *Abhinaya* that the play gets written', not for mere reading. Her earlier experience as an actress in proscenium theatre only made her realize the use of voice modulation and the use of words. But here she realizes the full potentiality of theatre. She uses her 'eyes, eyebrows, lips, hands, legs... everything'. One is reminded of Bharata's *Natyashastra* of total theatre—using all the paralinguistic devices of expression. *Natya* includes dance, music, *abhinaya*... everything that the human form is capable of.

Resorting to Shavian details in direction, Shaoli Mitra describes the Kathak Thakuran. Mitra says it in so many words: 'sheltered in the fiction of a major *Mahabharata* character, Draupadi, she wants to speak her own mind out... She is not any of the characters... she merely tells the story... she is not uneducated... she knows the names of several pundits and elaborates on their views... maybe she has just heard of them and out of her innate curiosity acquired the required knowledge from learned people.' The impression one gets from this is of a unique woman—simple, natural, certainly not modern and urban, very intelligent, self-educated through human interaction and definitely not through the reading of learned books. Now, this is a strategy to deviate the attention from the intellectual, modern feminist

concerns that are hidden. This is the indirect method of communication right down the line of the fool fooling the audience into wisdom by taking their intellectual guards off.

The relationship that is established with the audience is apparently direct, with an element of irony. She addresses them as 'Gunijana', which would perhaps translate as 'you wise and learned people' and 'Mahashaya' as 'Monsieurs' (educated elite). This apparent respect by putting the audience on a high pedestal can be misleading. As the story unfolds, many such wise and learned people and monsieurs among the array of characters from the *Mahabharata* are ridiculed with disarming innocence of a simple unlettered kathakthakuran. For example, when the kings and the great men arrive to try their luck with the super test for Draupadi's hand, their behaviour is mimed with devastating effect. She says (before miming): 'We will go, win, wear the garland, clasp the woman in a tight grip, and pull her out forcefully and take her away.' Later, when they fail in the test, and unsportingly try to create pandemonium, her comment goes like this: 'What if they cannot lift a bow and string it, or aim an arrow—you tell me—is their any difficulty in forming a gang and beating up the others.' These are aimed at male chauvinism that is out there, sitting in the modern audience in the auditorium (the wise and learned men, and the monsieurs out there). When Kunti mistakenly asks the brother Pandavas to share the spoils of their victory equally—their response and Draupadi's situation is narrated with sarcastic humour moving towards intense pathos: 'Their eyes moved simultaneously and stared at the virgin innocent Draupadi. Their faces lit up with hidden lust.' Kunti's faint and weak remorse at her accidental statement is subsumed under the sly guile of Yudhishtira's logic and decision (primarily motivated by his lust) and 'the decision was taken. But, oh! You learned and wise men, did you notice that nobody asked Draupadi about what she thought of the whole thing'.

The narrative goes on: 'Under the mediation of the great Vyasadeva, she became Pandava property.' At one point, and a very crucial one, the kathakthakuran cleverly dissolves the boundary line between the 'wise and learned men' of the *Mahabharata* ('Dhritarashtra is silent, Bhishma is silent') and the wise and learned male audience. After the dice disaster and before Draupadi's major insult, she mentions: 'Gentlemen, sometime such "kalas" come on the face of the earth, when the wise and learned people are silent and mute and the ones who are oppressed, go on being oppressed.' This is the first direct hit, otherwise mostly it is indirect.

Shifting from the socio-political, the narration moves to the personal and romantic; of a woman's desire for the one great love in her life. Here it begins with the same kind of satirizing of male chauvinism but poignantly moves to the inherent tragedy in the judgment of love—to which even the most sensitive and intelligent woman can succumb. Arjuna was Draupadi's one great love. Arjuna was attractive. But an attractive man would attract many women, and if he has no qualms, the greater possibility is that he would indulge in philandering in a big way. It is a no win situation for Draupadi and she falls into the hidden trap like a moth is attracted to fire. Realization dawns, but too late, as it mostly does: 'Arjuna did not stay celibate during the Vanavasa. He gathered a lot of women for company—Ulupi, Chitrangada, Subhadra.' Arjuna neglected her. In the end, on the path of the Mahaprasthanas, they started falling by the wayside, one by one. Draupadi, close to her final exit, realizes the powerful and silent love of a man (not as attractive as Arjuna). With her head on Bhima's lap, she gasps out her last wish: 'In my next birth, you will be only mine Bhima. Resting my tired head on your lap, I can finally sleep in peace. Only you will be mine. You, you, only mine.'

Who is speaking here? Apparently, it is Draupadi. But there are strategies of narration here that are not so simple.

Draupadi is essentialized into the essence of womanhood trapped in a male chauvinistic world and tragically coming to self-realization through intense suffering. Shaoli Mitra, at a crucial point in the play, leaves an instruction for the actress. Suspended at the moment when Arjuna (in the disguise of a Brahmin) is trying his fate with the Gandiva, the Kathakthakuran becoming Draupadi, becomes silent in expectation, swaying between hope and despair (it is love at first sight), before reassuming the role of the narrator (it has to be done effectively). His happens several times only when such intense sections of Draupadi come. It is here that Mitra, Kathakthakuran and Draupadi blend into one in a state of silent contemplative empathy.

The essentially male dominated narrative of *Mahabharata* gets subverted and inverted in fascinating ways as I have tried to show. Negotiating both ways between Karve's learned intellectual woman's reading of the *Mahabharata* written text and the rustic performative narration of the kind of Teejan Bai, Mitra finds her own individual voice and creates a very effective Kathakthakuran.

From NA, when we move to Shivaji Sawant, we get a totally different narrative strategy. Sawant uses the strategy of straightforward autobiographical narrative in its simplest form. The voice of Karna is assumed to reconstruct the saga from his point of view, carrying his own childhood, youth and adulthood. The basic format of autobiography is the movement backward in memory and forward in narrative, selecting and editing events from one's life for the sake of narrative order, meaning and a sense of continuity and evolution of self. Typical of the backward glance from a later point is the ability to infuse more meaning into a simple incident than it could have had at that time. This meaning is partly created by the reader's foreknowledge of the significance of that incident in terms of later development in the life that is yet to be narrated. These are the basic building blocks of autobiographical and also biographical narratives.

To bring a multi-dimensional, multi-cultural mega-narrative to the focused individuated micro-narrative of contemporary autobiography is perhaps possible only in a certain context. Sawant's context, as he says in so many words, is his total sense of exclusive empathy with Karna's character. From his childhood participation in a play called 'Angaraj Karna' where he did the role of Sri Krishna, he vividly remembers that despite playing Krishna's role, the voice that pierced his heart was the voice of his childhood friend doing Karna's role, telling Arjuna: 'Stay Partha, you are a Kshatriya and in this battlefield I am extracting the embedded wheel of my chariot—unarmed. Do not forget your Yuddha Dharma and Raj Dharma.' It was this voice that got deeply entrenched in Sawant's heart, haunting him through the years to tell the full story from the point of view of that voice—directly, simply. The voice had that quality of appeal beyond the lines of caste and class, at a fundamental humanistic level, and also to align itself with the basic human aspiration to realize one's full potential and get due recognition. At another level it has the deeper philosophical implications associated with the conflict and struggle between the undying, undefeated human spirit and impersonal destiny and fate. Sawant's instinctive empathy with this tragic essence of the human situation is able to create a narrative that can become the essential autobiography of all sensitive human beings who feel the clash between their rearing talent and potentiality and the tragic indifference of society and fate leading to the apparent triumph of mediocrity, power, caste and class.

The central narrative is Karna's, with radial narratives of Kunti Vrishali, Duryodhana and Shoda contributing more objective views of Karna's otherwise subjective portrayal of his situation. The events are too well known for me to repeat them. I will merely point out some elements that point out some features that bring out the element of freshness and originality. In this

connection, I will give one example from the scene of the major Olympiad where Karna discovers both, the heights of fame and the depths of degradation. I will briefly dwell on Draupadi's insult of Karna and its impact on Karna's mind.

Underlying the tragic martyrdom of Karna, Sawant focuses on certain major social issues and also the journey of self-realization and discovery that is so essential to the human situation. Karna's gradual and tragic destruction of his physical self is his tragic response to a deep hurt that is inflicted on him due to the existing social hypocrisies and morals. Sawant highlights this to create a contemporary criticism of inherent fallacies in our socio-economic value system. This criticism becomes valid even in the contemporary situation of fundamental class and caste inequalities that exist despite all our claims of modernity, democracy and socialism.

1) Karna, on the one hand, becomes symbolic of the talented human self struggling to find its true worth and recognition, facing ridiculous class and caste (social) obstructions enroute. This aligns itself very well with middle class and subaltern aspirations that seek to establish true worth through talent and hard work rather than pre-existing caste and class credentials. 2) On the other hand, his quest becomes a symbol of man's journey through layers of physical hindrances to discover the stark and solitary truths of one's self.

In the Olympiad, the first symbol emerges clearly. Karna's autobiography clearly demarcates his superiority to Arjuna, who is the only one worth challenging. Even the much hyped episode about Arjuna's grand reply to Drona about only seeing the bird's eye before the arrow springs from the string, is put down a few grades by Karna's reply to Shoda's query, as to what would he have done or said in that situation. Karna replies that he would have become the arrow as it went on its path to the eye of the bird. Even the path of the arrow would have dissolved in complete unity. This is certainly a notch above Arjuna's

answer. Sawant seems to be highlighting this aspect of Karna's personality again and again. The fluidity of the subject as it merges with the object completely is the ultimate of and beyond the martial arts. The reader is made conscious of the fact that Arjuna is what he is, not because of his inherent talent (which he, of course, does possess) but his privileged status in society, to which Dronacharya and Kripacharya (as the flawed teachers) contribute extensively. In fact, Drona and Kripa are products and parasites of this same system.

Karna's complete and total meditative focus is highlighted as he moves into the arena. The outside world recedes into nothingness and he equals each skill of Arjuna. It is the final test that reveals the difference and Arjuna's skill turns out to be the more mechanical and merely learned. Karna's, to use Bhishma's words, was the 'finer and higher art'. This fantastic incident is in the *Mahabharata* and we attribute it to Veda Vyasa's great vision. So, what is Sawant's contribution in furthering the narrative. The entire event is being seen from Karna's point of view. In Veda Vyasa's epic, Karna's character, despite its moments of temporary glory, becomes subservient to a larger design. Here, everything is contributing to Karna's path of self-realization. After the glory is the degradation. The crowd that hailed a moment back now howls 'son of a charioteer' in derogatory terms and Karna is shown as vacillating between these two poles of human judgement—unable to locate his true worth. It is this individuation and subjectivity that marks Sawant's strategy of the written narrative into which he is able to pour himself secretly, as many readers would, in their reading.

Much is said about Karna's role in dishonouring Draupadi after the dice debacle. Sawant traces the roots of Karna's strong anti-feeling towards Draupadi, via her open insult of him in the Swayamvara sabha, to his vulnerability (right from his adolescence) to the particular invective that Draupadi uses: 'He cannot even appear for the test

as he is not a Kshatriya, and is the son of a charioteer.' Karna's problem regarding his true identity was extremely deep rooted in his psyche. Even before the Olympiad, Karna is against the use of caste/class positions as reasons for the sake of excluding anything that fell outside. Karna's is the voice of the disinherited and the voice for talent, potential, skill and hardwork being the true estimates of value. To some extent Vyasa's *Mahabharata* narrates Draupadi's protest against Karna's trial for her hand. Sawant takes it further by entering into Karna's mind after this incident and traces the roots of his trauma and agony at Draupadi's rejection on grounds other than true worth. He recounts how her words struck home like poison darts deep into his heart and slowly the poison spreads through him. Right from the beginning of Karna's account of his life, this has been his obsession and Draupadi's words escalate this sense of injustice to an extreme point and we see cruel revenge manifesting itself in the incident (perhaps the only major one) that casts a dark spot or blemish in Karna's personality. He was not a woman hater as his beautiful relationship with Vrishali testifies. Draupadi and Kunti together could have made him one, but Sawant's reconstruction of Karna's narrative does not show him in that light.

Finally, a word about the martyr's path towards desolation, and the stark and solitary truths of the soul. Karna's autobiography moves, through Sawant's empathic maneuvering, to a willful dissolution of the self in an act of complete giving and scattering of himself for a cause (Adhirata, Radha, Shoda, Vrishali and Duryodhana give him that cause) that was discovered by him in his path of self-discovery. He rejects the affiliations of caste, family and class that normally determine one's Dharma and finally rejects even the divine appeal of Krishna. The final encounters with Krishna and Kunti are narrated with the purpose of revealing these rejections and Karna's coming to a realization of the ultimate purpose of life, the giving of

oneself totally to values that life offers at crucial moments, rather than the false social comforts of caste, class and even a politicized and socialized divinity. Such is the effect of the strategic narrative of Sawant.

From here, when we move to *The Great Indian Novel* by Shashi Tharoor, we come to a text that is born out of the colonial and post-colonial experience, and reveals some of the contemporary experiments of narrative. Tharoor's is a retrospective overview of the events leading to India's independence, with the satirical underpinning of the *Mahabharata* episodes and characters in the form of a grand contemporary mock epic. Tharoor's own background of journalism, law and diplomacy qualifies him to write a text that brilliantly transfers the *Mahabharata* politics, dharma, sexual and secular maneuvers to contemporary India.

Tharoor employs a unique narrative strategy. He creates a contemporary Veda Vyasa—who is VV in short—seeking a kind of secretary, scribe (as his own hand falters and shakes due to old age) from his friend Brahm. Brahm finally gets him a South Indian secretary with a 'big nose and shrewd intelligent eyes' and a 'substantial belly'. His name of course was Ganapathi. Throughout, Tharoor maintains this duality that connects the contemporary with the mythical. VV, with his brilliant linguistic abilities on the one hand, is the great Veda Vyasa. On the other, he is a litterateur, political analyst, diplomat and philosopher of the Shashi Tharoor kind. Ganapathi, on the one hand, is the legendary elephantine scribe God of the *Mahabharata*. On the other, he is a cynical, half amused, half bemused, modern listener/reader with a nose shaped like a question mark. The narrative itself bridges the raciness, performance and mimicry of the oral storytelling tradition and the slowing down into deep meditation, introspection, analysis of the written text.

Even as the characters emerge into the story, the readers' familiarity with the epic is taken as much for granted as his/

her familiarity with pre and post independence political scenario in India. As 'Ganga Datta's' sketch is portrayed, the reader will simultaneously connect him to Bhisma on the one hand and Gandhi on the other. Even as Ganga Datta's vows of celibacy are reminiscent of Gandhi's, here is a passage that is typical: 'Ganga Datta did not travel alone either. In later years he would be accompanied by a non-violent army of satyagrahis. GD would always have a penchant for making his most dramatic gestures before a sizeable audience. One day he was even to die in front of a crowd.' One mistake that the reader/listener can make is to expect an exact one to one correlation ship. Ganapathi's question mark nose often brings in the reader's consternation when this correlation does not work. Pandu is equated with Netaji Bose and Dhritarashtra with Jawarharlal Nehru. The logic works itself out through the body of the story but initially this might cause some problems. I will try to show a broad framework for the working of the logic of this mock epic. Here is a sample. The anxious expectation of the reader when Gandhari is to deliver her hundred sons is interestingly belied. With all the willing suspension of disbelief working overtime in the mind of the modern reader, this was least expected. After a 'twenty four hours' prolonged labour even VV was expecting 'a hundred lustily bawling sons' to emerge. But what came out was a girl, and then no more. VV consoled the grim Gandhari with the words: 'Your daughter Gandhari will be equal to a thousand sons...Priya Duryodhani would grow up one day to rule all India.' Brilliant isn't it—this blending of Indira Priyadarshini and Duryodhana. There are several points where the narrative surprises the reader with its strategic dislocation and re-allocation. I will give a few significant examples. The main battle of the *Mahabharata* is itself dislocated and re-allocated to a later point in the narrative. The Bhisma/Gandhi chapter is closed before that. Amba's reappearance as Shikhandi is connected with the Godse episode

brilliantly: 'Amba/Shikhandi was truly responsible for the Mahaguru's death, or whether it was not India collectively that ended Gagaji's life by tearing itself apart.' But the greatness of Bhisma/Gandhi is underlined by bringing Mohammad Ali Karna (yes you have guessed right, Jinnah) who was given Karnistan (Pakistan, again you are right) to placate him, coming to his deathbed, (bed of arrows, fasting bed!) and being blessed despite the profound disagreement.

The great battle is reallocated to a later point in the story. This is when Priya Duryodhani comes to power and heads the Kaurava party (Congress). The battle lines are drawn between the Bhisma/Gandhi blessed family line politics with Dhritarashtra/Nehru and his progeny Priya Duryodhani/Indira Priyadarshini at the helm of affairs on the one side, and the disinherited Pandu (Bose) stream with its five representative children of true India, who ultimately turn out to be as disillusioning. Here Tharoor takes a few liberties with History (as all Historians do). Tharoor's (sorry VV's) narrative here moves into the metaphoric and symbolic level. Yudhishtira was 'qualified as a lawyer but made politics his only vocation'. Bhima 'was the army'. Arjuna was a 'journalist' representing the 'spirit' of free India to which 'he ably gave voice'. Nakul went to the administrative and Sahadeo to the diplomatic services. Together they shared the bed of Draupadi Mokrashi. Now Draupadi Mokrashi in Tharoor's narrative assumes an intriguing metaphorical status. She is the product of the secret alliance between Dhritarashtra/Nehru and Lady Drewpad/Vicereine (Lady Mountbatten, no prizes for the right guess) and represents the birth of post-colonial India: 'and so it happened; on the soft capacious bed of the Vicereine's private suite...my blind son of India took possession of all that Brittainia had to offer him. And as the passion and coolness of their coupling, the tenderness and rage of their caresses mounted to a dizzying tearing burst of final release, the fireworks burst white, saffron and green in

Dhritarashtra's mind. Midnight exploded into dawn. He was free...the infant girl bearing the indeterminate pink and brown colouring of her mixed parentage' was born. Draupadi henceforth represents the beauty and plenitude of the new nation. Tharoor here employs a fantastic strategy to equate the contemporary events with the events in the *Mahabharata*. It is Shakuni Shankar Dey (again, right guess) on whose advice the one sided and loaded dice game is played. Everything is lost, Emergency imposed and the five brothers literally are hounded and exiled, their freedom shackled, and Draupadi is stripped. Here is Tharoor's metaphoric version of the stripping of Draupadi: 'However hard you try Priya Duryodhani, he said in a calm, deep voice (this is Krishna, and I will end my narration of Tharoor's narration with his story) you and your men will never succeed in stripping Draupadi Mokrashi completely. In our country she will always have enough to maintain her self respect.' VV introspects later: 'I realized how Duryodhani and her minions had been stripping the nation and its institutions.'

Yes, Krishna, we come to him finally. Arjuna, the journalist on being exiled from Draupadi's bed for mistakenly entering the bedroom while Yudhishtira and Draupadi were making love, goes on a journalistic tour of India, having his escapades with Ulupi, Chitrangada, et al on the way. While touring the South he hears of this remarkable local MLA who plays the flute and is an expert Ottamthullal exponent. He meets D Krishna Parthasarathy (Dwarkaveetile Krishnakutty Parthasarathy Menon) who had 'God's own mischief in his eyes'. He is 'joyous, relaxed. Laughing', amoral, and 'wears his wisdom lightly, expressing it with a profound simplicity'. Krishna is happy as the Gokarnam Party secretary and is not interested in the Centre. It is much later that his help is sought and the Emergency is surprisingly dissolved and elections are announced: 'It was said that Priya Duryodhani had received the visit of a political sage, a dark man from

the South. Another suggested that she had consulted an astrologer named Krishna, who had prophesized great success if the polls were held on a certain date.' Before the election, representatives from both sides seek Krishna's guidance and he puts his proposal forward: 'one side can have me, alone, not as a candidate, with no party funds, but fully committed to their campaign; the other can have the massed ranks of my party workers, disciplined and dedicated men and women'. And for the opposition, VV chooses Krishna. Krishna's first major problem arose when: 'Arjuna, on the verge of filing his nomination papers for the Opposition, was assailed afresh by doubts that had bedevilled his years of journalism: "Is it right, should I fight... if I just write, won't I cast more light?"...and the essence of Krishna's advice was (to sum up the Bhagvat Gita) "if you do not fight now...you won't have anything to write about afterwards". Of course a miniature BG follows where Arjuna is finally convinced that there is nothing wrong in fighting an election and defeating his own kith and kin (do not forget that the alien, the Britishers, had already departed). The election is fought and won by the people's party (the Janata Party, right) and Yudhishtira is made the new Prime Minister. But hopes are belied and Yudhishtira's "urine

drinking ways" (again you have guessed right) are mocked: "If I drank what he drinks, I'd be for prohibition too...would you ever invite the Prime Minister to a bring-a-bottle party".'

We can notice how Tharoor strategically embeds one narrative into the other in a subtle story within a story format, playing with the reader's simultaneous acquaintance with the contemporary socio-political events and the basic text of the *Mahabharata*. This creates a large scale mock epic. The style remains that of oral narration with Ganapathi's quizzical nose constantly troubling VV for explanations (reminiscent of Rushdie's 'dung lotus' in *Midnight's Children*). The fantastical events in the *Mahabharata*, on the one hand are realistically portrayed, and on the other, visualized in a dream sequence (on a mythical past) creating a kind of magic realism of the Rushdie variety. This is a post midnight novel in more ways than one. It is a midnight's child with Rushdie as an antecedent. Even the chapter titles have a colonial and post colonial ring: 'The Dual with the Crown', 'A Raj Quartet', 'Midnight's Parents', 'Passages through India', 'The Bungle Book'. One can notice how what we call magic realism today is: a) born out of a blending of the epic imagination of the mythical mind and the fabulous historicization of

contemporary socio political life and b) the natural tendency of spinning oral yarns and the introspective reflection of the writing process. The canvas here is large and larger than life, exciting and scintillating, touching hidden depths here and there. It is very different from the tragic intensity of NA or the vitriolic attack on the elitist superstructure as in SS or the cathartic and heart shattering rendering of Karna's autobiography. The *Mahabharata* has elicited a remarkable variety of contemporary response.

There have been many more retellings of the stories from the *Mahabharata*, in contemporary times. I have been selective, bearing two things in mind: 1) I feel that these texts represent experiments in different genres of expression: theatre, poetry, autobiography and fiction and 2) they cut across responses of different and comprehensive areas of society—subaltern, feminist, middle class and intelligentsia.

NOTES

1. Arun Kolatkar, Pras Prakasan, Mumbai, December 2004
2. Shaoli Mitra, Ananda Press and Publication Pvt. Ltd., Kolkata, Baishakh, 1398
3. Shivaji Sawant, Bharatiya Jnanpith, New Delhi, 2001, (24th Edition), first edition in 1974
4. Shashi Tharoor, Penguin India, New Delhi, 1989

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