

Retelling Indian Mythology Through The Novels Of Devdutt Pattanaik

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Abstract: Literature is depiction of human life, culture and experiences. Literature engulfs both reality and imagination. Through the lens of Mythology one can experience the age old rich culture, rituals, practices and more. Lexically Mythology refers to sacred tales that is of real and imaginary. Study of myth and mythology enables one to probe more about ancient rituals and practices. Mythologies are of various types and every nation has its own vivid tales. Indian Mythology is not an exception; it has sumptuous tales about gods, goddesses, super natural agents, artistic elements, folklore and more. As ages pass by few tales are drew a blank, still many novelists retained the essence of mythology by retelling such myths in different genres of literature. Novelists such as Chitra Bannerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Kavita Kane, Devdutt Pattanaik and many writers restored the past through their retellings. In this paper I propose to show how mythology been retold in a novel way. Here I have chosen the novels of the eminent writer Devdutt Pattanaik and his works such as *7Secrets of Shiva*, *The Book of Ram*, *The Goddess in India*, *Brahma The Creator*, *Shikhandi: and other tales*, *7 Secrets of the Goddess*, *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of The Mahabarata*, *Myth=Mithya*, *Sita: An Illustrated Retelling of the Ramayana*, *My Gita* and more. Through his retellings the ancient epics is retouched with the same grandeur and value. This paper aims at showcasing that these retellings can actually bring back the myths to cherish more and imbibe in one's life. Moreover these folklores and myths also have answers to many unsolved puzzles like Queer identity, laws of karma, nature's connection with mankind, and more.

Key Words: Mythology, sumptuous, folklore, myths, queer identity

Introduction:

Epic exhibits the life and culture of a nation and its people. For instance, in Mahabarata, it is Shakuntala who arrives at Dushyantha's court to seek protection for their son. But in Kalidasa's version, it is Shakunthala's father who accompanies her to Dushyantha's court to ensure and establish his daughter's social status as the King's wife. This reversion of Shakunthala in Mahabarata is contradictory to Vyasa's tale that shows the change in society. This proves that, the epic was constantly revisited and rewritten by different poets, and sages with accordance to their times. Similarly, even in this modern age there is a need to revisit Mahabarata. Despite the stories, the epic provides the necessary moral and ethical counsel for the present generation.

This paper is an attempt to revisit Mahabarata and Ramayana in a new and different perspective as presented by Devdutt Pattanaik, in his book *Jaya: An illustrated retelling of Mahabharata*, *Sita: An Illustrated retelling of the Ramayana* and *Shikhandi* and other tales they won't tell you that. The main aim of this paper is to propagate how retelling mythology can be interesting and unfolds the hidden mysteries and wonders. This paper also concentrates on providing the moral message like values, virtues, ethics, and philosophy for the humankind. The paper is an attempt to establish and argue in defense of my perceptions about how life is absurd and our main adventure is to lead our routine life with ethics and to share brotherhood with one another, with reference to Devdutt Pattanaik's book *Jaya* which focuses on ethics and values for humankind whereas *Sita* breaks her stereotyped version here she is a reformer, bold, courageous which was the beautiful aspect of how retellings can be more great. This paper also examines the cultural, political and religious aspects of the book. Through this paper, one can get an optimistic view of how revisiting mythology can transform humankind to lead a righteous life

Revisiting Mahabarata through *Jaya: An illustrated retelling of Mahabharata*

"A New thought, new idea never alters the past, but it rejuvenates the ideals of the past". In the same way, the following paper is my attempt to share my views upon *Jaya* by Devdutt Pattanaik which has revisited India's one of the greatest epic *Mahabarata*. Epics are not just stories, histories or events, it also depicts the culture of a nation, preaches valuable ethics to mankind and moulds them, and it is a continuous process. Hence revisiting an epic

revitalizes the mankind to lead their life with ethics. Mahabarata mainly focused on the establishment of Dharma and Laws of Karma.

By revisiting the epic, one can understand the laws of Dharma and Karma which is argued and justified through multiple points of view. Revisiting and retelling the stories from Mahabarata helps the mankind to learn moral values, ethics, virtues and philosophies even in this modern world. The chief characters like Janamjeya, Kanva, Budhu, Shantanu, Bhishma, Drona, Duryodana, Yudhishtra, Draupadi, Arjuna, Bhima, Nakula, Sahadeva, Krishna etc., preaches mankind a great lesson and we can feel the experience through their flaws and reactions. This helps every human being to connect with their own blessings and weakness and it results in denouement where an individual can analyze one self, understand the meaning of life in this world and thus purify themselves. By reading the epic, one undergoes the Aristotelian 'Katharsis.' Mahabarata in the present form has 18 parvas or chapters. The epic is made of one hundred thousand verses, Vyasa through this tale concentrated on all aspects of human existence such as connection with the self and the society, and its ethics, and codes of Dharma, Economic activities as Artha, Ecstatic activities as Kama and divine activities as Lokha are presented and justified in the form of great epic. This epic is retold in varied version by great ancestors and their heirs, of Gurus and students, of friends and of enemies, and of winners and losers. But every version withstands test of test of time and preaches mankind to lead a righteous life, if not how they will face the laws of Karma.

Through the conversation between Janamjeya* and Astika*, we can comprehend the real meaning of Dharma and the fate of Kauravas who attained Swarga, whereas Pandavas attained naraka. Moreover Astika employs *Vaisampayana** to narrate the tale which in future crowned with the name as "*Mahabaratha*". There are many characters that leave behind great mark in our heart as it appeals to present life, such as through *Pururava's* life, we can understand blind love for *Urvashi* and how it leads him to obsessive downfall. Here one can learn a great lesson the power of blind passion for love leads to a great collapse. *Yayati complex* *is revealed through the life of *Devayani* and *Sarmishu*, it shows how *Yayati* marries *Devayani* which led to the drawback for the descendants of Yadu, who were just kingmakers and they can't usurp the throne. With the character of *Kaushika* who abandoned his parents to become a sage, but he learnt a great lesson through a common man- butcher, who advised him that one need to accept that everyone's life is the result of past karmas. Later clear vision towards life helped him to attain harmony.

Mahabarata also exhibits the feminine part of female characters, these characters appears as icons which withstands for every generation and preaches many morals, *Amba's** character showcases the braveness of a woman and how she avenges the death of *Bhishma* in her next birth as *Shikhandi*. Similarly, *Draupadi* taunts at the fall of *Duryodhana*, which sows the seeds for her own humiliation in future, this preaches the mankind that one should not humiliate others. Through the character of *Savithri*, everyone can learn how strong will can change anything one's own fate, her staunch belief to bring her husband from deathbed and with her wit she was able to bring her husband *Satyavan* from *Yama**.

One may question what Dharma is and according to Krishna*, "To keep one's word is the fundamental principle of Dharma"

There are many morals one can learn from the characters in the Mahabarata, and it is necessary that one should accumulate those ideals, execute them in their own life and preach the same to the future generation. Through *Arjuna's* life one can learn how mere strength alone is not important for one's survival, but divine grace of God is also important, when he was supposed to save the child of *Brahman*, but he fails to save the child, so he decides to kill himself, but Krishna directs him to Lord *Vishnu* and there he learns his purpose, to restore Dharma on earth. *Arjuna* stands as the symbol of action while *Krishna* stands for wisdom. The relationship between *Krishna* and *Arjuna* portrays the relationship between Mortal and Immortal. The friendship between *Duryodhana* and *Karna* taught a great lesson to the world, *Karna's* determination to be the friend of *Duryodhana* and stand by his side during *kurukshetra* even when he came to know that he is of royal birth, but he remembered that when the whole world rejected him, *Duryodhana* gave him a high stature and he decided to pay his whole life as gratitude, and he stood to fight against his own brothers. They stand as a role model for friendship.

The tales of *Mahabarata* has withstood the test of time, since it is applicable for all ages. For instance, the havocs of gambling (game of dice) led to the downfall of a great *Pandavas* kingdom, loss of trust with his countrymen, and humiliation of a woman. *Yudhishtra's* uncontrolled desire to play gambling resulted in many problems for his entire family; they even destined to live in forest for 13years. Again this failure evangelize mankind how man can learn many things even in his utter failure, during the exile, the *Pandava* brothers gained great wisdom from many sages, which enriched their spiritual power and mental strength. They learned many values such as value of marital relationship, value of children, value of promise, value of worldly responsibilities, value of forgiveness and much more.

The Kurukshetra war enunciates a great prophecy to the mankind, When Arjuna trembles to fight against his own masters and brothers, Lord Krishna gave his oracle which is termed as the song of god – *BhagvadGita*. This oracle unfolds the divine truth such as truth in death – Where only one's mortal body is destroyed, whereas *atma** never dies. We can also understand that seeking permanence in this mortal world is impossible, never nurture ego, vengeance, hatred. It also clarifies that our experiences and achievements in this world is just illusion (*maya*). We can understand that all events, changes in the world are as common as joy and sorrow, winter and summer, light and dark. If one attains this enlightenment, mankind will never suffer. With the god's advice, one can assert that all actions in this materialistic world have connectivity with the past actions and that is termed as *Karma*. *Karma* gives us a message that one needs to accept the change, and accept the fact that nothing is permanent and all incidents or circumstances which every man is having a purpose and connectivity, and, man need to accept the changes and face the occurrences without any expectations. God also clarifies that every blessing and curse is the result of one's past actions and thus human being need to cope up with the reactions. God also clarifies that the purpose of Kurukshetra is to cleanse the human mind and heart (body and soul), to establish Righteousness (*Dharma*) and to discover the importance of soul. I just quote the words of Krishna

“He who says he kills and he who says he is killed are both wrong. I am both the killer and the killed. Yet I cannot die. I am your flesh and your soul, that which changes and that which does not change. I am the world around you, the spirit inside you and the mind in between. I alone can shatter the web of *Karma*”. [182]

Revisiting Ramayana through *Sita: An illustrated retelling of Ramayana*

This book elaborates the tale of Ramayana from Sita's perspection, Janaka found an abandoned girl child and she was named as *Bhumija*, because she is got from the mother of earth. As Sita grows one can feel a different view of Janaka how he gave her an equal position amidst the great rishis to participate the conference which was later known as the *Upanishad*. When *Ashtavakara* gives a clear definition about *Aham* one can actually juxtapose themselves with it and understand the real self. *Ashtavakara* said to Janaka

“Animals fight to defend their bodies, Humans curse to defend their imagination of themselves. This imagined notion of who we are and how others supposed to see us, is called *aham*. *Aham* constantly seeks validation from the external world. When that is not forthcoming it becomes insecure. *Aham* makes human accumulate things; through things we hope people will look upon us as we imagine ourselves. That is why, Janaka, people display their wealth and their knowledge and their power. *Aham* yearns to be seen.” [19]

In the chapter *Dasratha Lets Go of His Sons* through the words of Rama reiterates the path of wisdom is not an easy one. Janaka's daughters were shown in different shade their sense of understanding and reasoning is quiet astonishing, such a retelling glorifies the stereotyped females as more knowledgeable which is clear from the words of *Viswamitra*

“*Viswamitra*'s notices that Janaka's daughters asked questions like *Gargi* of the *Upanishad*; *Dasharatha*'s sons preferred obeying commands. Different seeds nurtured in different fields by different farmers produce very different crops indeed” [41]

The chapter *The Liberation of Ahilya* reveals the real understanding in a relationship. The words of Sita redefine the relationship between couples

“If she is wise, she will accommodate the inadequacy. If he is wise, he will strive to grow,” [43]

Retellings are not just mere narrations it reimagines the usual portrayal of a character in an unusual way like how Sita lifts the bow of Shiva single handedly. It really shows the real power hidden---- in Sita.

The reality hidden in female's life is showcased in the life of Sita, *Urmila*, *Mandavi* and *Shrutakriti* here again after the rituals of their marriage they won't look back since they know the letting go of things is real wisdom. This paper also showcases the other minor female characters such as *Koushalya* who is so strong and optimistic even after her son went to forest her reply to *Dasaratha* was astounding

“The sun will rise. The birds will chirp and the city will go about his business. The world does not need us, my husband. We need the world.... Fortunes and misfortunes come and go but life continues” [87]

Even the characters like *Urmila* sacrifices her emotions, *Mandodari* paved the way for Sita to choose her freedom. Through the Epilogue one can comprehend how the tale of Ram and Sita recycles after every generation. This repetition is for the human race to understand their value of existence. More over these archetypes preaches human beings to overcome the different psychological imbalances. Sita and Ram acts as an epitome of faith as rightly quoted by the writer

“Fear is a constant and faith is a choice. Fear comes from *Karma*, from faith arises *dharma*...Faith creates a Sita and a Ram. They will come into being only if we have faith that the mind can expand until we do not abandon the world even when the world abandons us”[312]

With this it is understood the real essence of life is to relish the past and inculcate that in our present. These retellings rejuvenate one's mind and purify the soul. These epics been retold to foster the hope in mankind. Revisiting this epic actually creates a revision towards the reality of our life.

Embracing queer theory through the retelling of Devdutt's Shikhandi and other tales

Mythology acts as a lens through which one can get to the bottom of innumerable mysteries such as gender identity, cross dressing, homosexuality, bisexuality, transgenders, hermaphrodites and more. Devdutt Pattanaik's Shikhandi is a milestone in unfolding the queer concepts. Queer tales are not something to be evaded it enlightens the debarred community such as transgenders, tribadic, Sapphic and more. This book gives a new perception of unique idea about queerness in human life. The tales from various Puranas, Vedas, Jainism and Buddhism, Mahabarata, Ramayana, oral traditions of Bengal, Vraj, Skanda Purana throws a light on queer theory. Hindu mythology has innumerable proofs of such queerness, femaleness and manliness. Moreover many other myths all over the world have their own proof for such queerness. Through these mythical tales and its proofs one can actually comprehend that such kind of queer culture and queer people are not to be violated or treated as exceptions rather these queer people and their life style has its own traces in ancient myths too. Here it is an attempt to enunciate how retellings can be more thought provoking and it refreshes one's ideals on such queer relations. Every tale in this novella just brings out the queer concept as a familiar one unlike how the contemporary discriminations against these queer concepts.

In the first chapter which is an excerpt from Mahabaratha, it brings the character of Shikhandi to the limelight, Shikhandi daughter of Drupada, born as a girl but she gained all the knowledge of warships and battle. Shikhandi was grown like a male in fact she was even married to a bride, knowing that Shikhandi is a female, the bride complained to her father King Hiranyavarna, he raised his army to punish Drupada. Hearing this Shikhandi went to forest, there she met a yaksha called Sthuna, he donated his manhood for one night and King Hiranyavarna understood that Shikhandi is male. He apologized for his mistake, moreover Shikhandi went back to forest to return his manhood as he promised to sthuna, but Kubera, King of Yakshas impressed with Shikhandi's honesty he restored the manhood upon Shikhandi until he dies. Later as Shikhandi vowed to kill Bhishma in her previous birth as Amba, she fought in the battle with Pandavas and Bhishma was killed by Arjuna as Bhishma won't raise his bow against a woman. This kind of organ transplantation has prevailed in our ancient days, hence such people who transforms themselves as male to female and female to male is quiet a natural transition.

These kind of transitions is not only existed with mortals, even immortal gods, goddesses, devas, asuras, angels, demons and more are the forerunners in queer relations. For instance we have heard many oral tales such as Gods often incarnate themselves as humans to safeguard their devotees. In fact Devdutt here quotes about the *Thayumanaswamy* where Lord Shiva transformed as a mother and came to earth to help his devotee's daughter who was suffering during pregnancy. Here again one can conceptualize devotion towards god cannot be bounded by gender norms.

The tales from Puranas has various morals, codes, practices such as the tale of Lord Vishnu who transformed as Mohini and united with Lord Shiva who gave birth to the gods like Lord Ayyappan, Lord Hanuman such tales again elucidate that even the immortal gods define these queer transformations are quotidian. As the author rightly quotes such incarnations and transitions between Lord Vishnu and Lord Shiva is to restore peaceful relationship in both the sects.

"In Vaishanava traditions, Hanuman is not related to Shiva. In Shaiva tradition, Hanuman is either Shiva's avatar or son. In *Agni Purana*, the sight of Mohini makes Shiva to spill his semen, which Vayu, the wind-god, places in the female monkey Anjana's womb via her ear. Thus Hanuman, the monkey god is born, who serves Ram, Vishnu's avatar, much revered by Hindus. Here, queerness is used to unify rival Hindu sects"[20]

Relationship between two women and two male may be viewed indifferently, whereas this kind of relationship can be chaste, spiritual or friendly. This kind of queer bonding exists from our ancient tales such as the bonding between Duryodhana and Karna, Arjuna and Krishna, Koperunchozhan and Pisirandhaiyar and many more.

There is an invisible and indefinable bonding exists with such relationships which are not for physical pleasures rather a kind of abstract feelings amalgamate them.

Another distinct identity of cross dressing is quiet practiced even by gods and legends, most of this utilized in case of secret attacks and to evoke laughter. Here the author quotes about the deity Krishna who actually loves to dress up and in much lore he plays with the gopikas by stealing their dresses. Queer identity is not more a vague a term in our society, just like other heterosexuals this kind of queer relationships, intersex, hijras, and more exists in our own culture. Moreover the divine deities have treated such queer things as a usual transformation. Through these retellings of such ancient myths and folklores one can actually conceptualize the physical and mental trauma

encountered by such queer people and queerness in the contemporary era, the denied identity for such suppressed people should retained for their identity as equal to the commons.

Glossary:

*Astika – Nephew of Vasuki, King of Nagas.

*Janamjeya – Grandson of Arjuna

*Vaisampayan – Guardian of Vyasa’s great tale Mahabaratha.

*Atma – Soul

*Amba – War Goddess

*Yama – God of Death

*Yayati complex – Glorification of the son who sacrifices all his happiness for the sake of his father.

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