Portrayal of Indian Cultural Icons in Contemporary Retellings: Envisioning Impact on the Millennial Generation

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ABSTRACT:
The increasing desire for fresh narratives in literature and visual media has made fictionalisation, or retelling, of Indian epics and Puranic myths, a profitable endeavour. Retelling what the West refers to as "myths" is not inherently new; in fact, India has produced numerous renditions of Ramayana, authored by poets such as Kumbhan, Krittivas, Bal Ramadas, Bhoj, Tulsidas and others. However, the present wave of retellings differs greatly from those that were produced until around 1970s. The contemporary retellings, which are said to be in line with the postmodern perspective, are more of re-representations of the original texts. The use of epistemological tools along with a Re-orientalist assessment of indigenous literary and philosophical traditions reveals a colonial mindset at work. This paper examines some representative texts and locates different degrees in re-telling the authentic stories from hallowed texts. In addition to these concerns, the article explores how these practices affect young generation since the indigenous cultural environment does not sync well with all that globalization has come to stand for.

KEYWORDS: Retellings, Myths, Indian English literature, Indian society, Indian culture.

Introduction

The genre of re-tellings of Indian epics and Puranic stories keeps on expanding as is evident from the burgeoning tribe of writers like Ashok Banker, Namita Gokhale, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Amish Tripathi, Ashwin Sanghi, Anuja Chandramaauli, Anand Neelakantan, Kavita Kane, Samhita Arni, Sharath Komarraju, Sundari Venkatramaan Nilanjan Chowdhary, Krishna Udayshankar…the list is endless. This practice has various pros and cons which require a serious examination. This kind of treatment has the potential to create a skewed perception of cultural icons in young minds besides attempting to shear the hallowed texts of their essentially ethical message and spiritual import.

Discussion

Let us have a glimpse of the kind of work that goes into what are called the 'retellings' of classical works. Although re-tellings have been done in modern India earlier also, but treatment has changed in the hands of a new class of writers. Ashok Banker is the first of this type whose work will be scrutinized in this paper. He is a popular Anglo-Indian writer, who has written more than fifty books. An estimate of his popularity can be gauged from the description available on Banker's website which claims that more than 2.5 million copies of his books have been sold in 58 countries. Most of these books are in the form of retellings of ancient Indian epics and folktales. That is indeed an impressive figure for a writer who graduated from writing crime thrillers to writing retellings or re-representations.

We take up Banker's novel titled *Siege of Mithila*, one of his earlier works. It does not take long for one to realize that Banker alters the narrative as it is known to general public in India from the revered ancient scriptures written by the sage Valmiki or Tulsidas, as well as through the popular theatrical productions in most Indian cities prior to the Dussehra festival.

The book begins with the portrayal of Rama and Lakshman as students in Guru Vishwamitra's ashram. A messenger from Ayodhya comes with the advice from King Dasratha for the princes to return to Ayodhya. The Guru knows that Ravana means to attack the Aryavarta nation. So, he, with Rama and Lakshman and others, sets out for Ayodhya. Manthara, the maid in Ayodhya palace, is identified as Ravana's spy. It may be noted that the plan to attack and the woman spy are the product of Banker's imagination and do not find mention in any authentic text. But there is a lot more to survey.

It is a world of fantasy and magic that Banker has created. Through magic, Manthra transforms a serving girl into a clone of the queen Kaikeyi who is then deputed to murder King Dasaratha. Ravana, on the other hand, infuses life into a dead soldier named Bheria who is then made to go to Ayodhya to possess King Dasaratha's body and pass orders on the other two sons -- Bharat and Shatrughan -- to proceed with the entire Ayodhya army in two different destinations so that Ayodhya is left defenceless and Ravana can seize it. Bheria is shown to have succeeded in his mission but the situation is finally handled by Guru Vasishtha who provides a mantra whereby entire army of Ravana evaporates in thin air. However, that is at the end of the novel.

Banker has chosen to lend the novel the touch of a thriller. Sita is no demure princess but a warrior who, along with a female bodyguard Nakhudi Devi from Haryana (yes, Banker notes the name of the state that was born in 1966 CA!); both disguised as soldiers go about in the forest surveying the city's security, but are surprised by bandits, from which predicament Sita is delivered by, who else, Rama! Sita and Nakhudi, disguised as soldiers, are taken to be travelling Kshatriyas willing to work for any master for money. So, the mercenaries are not just at work in our times!

The *Swayamvar* (the ceremony where the selection of the groom by the girl is held – an ancient practice) at Mithila is organized but is marred by the appearance of Ravana in disguise. Surprisingly, he is able to meet the condition laid down for the *Swayamvar* and claim Sita. When Janak resists, he holds him by the throat at which Sita begs for her father's life and agrees to be Ravana's wife! However, the situation is saved by the two brothers and then Sita is won by Ramaa. Ravana disappears but not before delivering a warning to   seize Mithila by evening and then rape princess Sita! (331). Such a concoction in not-so-disguised language is an affront to the sentiments of the majority Hindu community for whom Ramaa is a godly figure.

The serving girl turned by Manthara into a Kaikeyi clone, goes to poison King Darsratha, as the famed *vish-kanyas* (literally -- poison girls) of the middle-ages did. But while cradling the Maharaja's face between her breasts, she "opened her jaws, revealing two enormous serpentine fangs" (132)! Then, "With one final heart-chilling hiss, Kaikeyi raised her head and fell on Dasaratha with the fury of a predator in heat. Her mouth closed over Dasaratha's neck" (133). A female Dracula indeed! Manthara is portrayed as a very powerful sorcerer who throws even queen Sumitra into her secret chamber, the walls of which move with the chanting of mantras. And Sumitra outsmarts the *daiimaa* through a fancy-dress act that makes her look like the goddess Shakti! (406).

There is no end to the imposition of present-day situation on the story of the epical period. Rama and Lakshman behave like modern playboys. The narration of a scene where Sita is looking for Ramaa would be an apt extract here:

Lakshman came up beside him. He spoke softly in Rama's right ear, 'Looks like someone's still sore as a mule at being outed, brother. Watch out for her back-kick!' Rama dug his elbow into Lakshman's ribs. (353)

It's not just the modern slang, the novel also foists all types of modern ailments and lifestyle aberrations on the ancient society. Thus, the saints have discovered cure for diabetics (72) and Manthara's serving girl offers to please her mistress in the lesbian style (84). The serving girl-turned-Kaikeyi goes about naked, "brushing against the guards" (86) but the guards would only think that the queen had taken more of "soma than she could hold" (86).

The writer could have at least taken the trouble of finding out the relevance and meaning of simple Sanskrit words. He puts in the mouth of young students of the Sidh Ashram '*Om Hari Swaha*' (147) as if this were the Sanskrit equivalent of 'Amen' that is normally said at the end of a Christian prayer. Guru Vasishta is made to proclaim this very phrase when he finishes his speech and the congregation too responds with '*Swaha*' (282)! The normal ending in such cases is *iti* meaning 'the end'. Banker's knowledge of even Hindi terms seems inadequate. Instead of the word 'brahmachari' for the students, Banker uses 'Brahmacharya' (150). Seers are addressed as 'Mahadev' which term actually stands for Lord Shiva. Similarly, the invocation 'Jai Mata Di' (400) sits ill at ease with the description of mythical times. Out of ignorance does the author interpret 'Indra-prastha' as the abode of god Indra and situates it in Swarga Lok (477)! Indraprastha is one of the five villages that find mention in the other epic Mahabharata and the name still adorns an area near Delhi.

There is the depiction of the city of Mithila – low on defences but high on gambling halls, blouseless beauties, polygamy and polyandry etc.! (411) Surprisingly, Guru Vasishta is said to have used 'sorcery' to remove the veil of Sita in the jungle. And Sita wanted to "scream out loud and run away from these gawking, gaping people" (308). She admonishes them, "And the rest of you, if you want entertainment, go find the nearest tavern or dance hall! This isn't a free show provided for your amusement" (308).

Prior to the Swayamvar, when they meet in the jungle, Lakshman speaks to Sita in this way, "I hear Mithila virgins have fine figures too! You really know how to provoke a man's imagination'… 'I'll be dreaming all night of naked virgins prancing down the raj-marg!" (274). Clearly, Banker has taken substantial liberty with the epical tale, as it is generally believed and added to it the spice of titillation to cater to the Western readers.

Amish Tripathi is another popular Indian writer who is reported to have sold some two million copies of his Shiva Trilogy comprising *The Immortals of Meluha, The Secret of the Nagas,* and *The Oath of the Vayuputras.* The sales are claimed to be over Rs 500 million and making the Shiva Trilogy the fastest selling book series in Indian history. After this, Tripathi has published novels based on Ramayana also. Tripathi seems to have been inspired by Ashok Banker but his language is rather prosaic and shorn of literary beauty. So far as the subject matter is concerned, he mixes up things without caring for the element of authenticity as a critic notes: "These three major strands—myth, history, fiction—combined in the most awkward of all possible manners; with possible dangerous consequences" (Gurevitch).

Lord Shiva, one of the trinity of gods in Indian epics, is presented in the novel *The Immortals of Meluha*, as the leader of a tribe called Gunas, who live at the foot of Mount Kailash in Tibet. Nandi is not the bull on which Shiva rides; rather the captain from another clan -- the Suryavanshi which is at daggers drawn with the Chandravanshi clan. He invites Shiva and his tribal Gunas to settle in Meluha (Kashmir) which is considered to be the richest and most powerful empire in the world. Having reached there, Shiva is declared a messiah (140) who has come to help the Suryavanshi clan of Meluha against yet another clan -- the Chandravanshi clan of Ayodhya, who even though worship Lord Rama, have deviated from his message of egalitarianism. They carry out terrorist attacks on the Suryavanshis. The issue of conflict is the Somras which was invented by the Chandravanshis and which has the quality of keeping youth intact and adding to years in life.

Shiva is careless about his looks and when he is to be presented to the Suryavanshi king, he is made 'presentable': "His hair had been oiled and smoothened. Lines of expensive clothes, attractive earrings, necklaces and other jewellery were used to adorn his muscular frame. His fair face had been scrubbed clean with special Ayurvedic herbs to remove years of dead skin and decay" (30). Shiva wins over Sati through his dance performance just as it happens in many Hindi movies!

Now, Sati is a 'vikarma', i.e., she is supposed to have committed some sin in previous life and the blot persists in her next life. Clearly, it is a take on the nefarious caste system prevalent in India. The author explains that Lord Rama had institutionalized the system of 'vikarma' based on one's deeds which is now applied irrationally. However, his Shiva does not know about Lord Rama (34), nor does he know the meaning of the sacred word 'Aum' or Om. Nandi acts as a Guru to Shiva and enlightens him about the meaning of 'Aum'.

The corruption of myth goes on without any scruples. The action is placed around 1850 BC and the reign of lord Rama is anterior to it by 1250 years, according to this novel. But when it comes to matching with the accepted chronology in Puranas, Ramaa and Krishna cannot be placed anterior to Shiva, for the triumvirate of gods – Brahman, Vishnu and Shiva is the primordial divine pantheon ruling the universe and Rama and Krishna are supposed to be the incarnations of Vishnu only. So, how could Shiva worship Rama? In India, it is common to see pictures of Rama worshipping Shivalingum (a Shiva symbol) at the southern tip of India while preparing to assault Ravana's kingdom in Lanka. This topsy-turvying of the chronology is a major blunder committed by Tripathi.

Shiva attains the title of 'Neelkanth'(blue throat), which is not the result of the mythical *Devaasur Sangram* or the battle of gods with demons, but of drinking too much of Somras (a celestial drink)! Tripathi does not spare history too. Tripathi mixes up imaginings from diverse sources -- Plato's *Republic* to Marxist utopia. Children are the state property in Meluha. The writer fiddles with the idea of effacing caste division, and so in the novel, children are brought up by the state in 'Maika'. When they turn sixteen, they pass various exams. Anyone passing Brahmin exam, would be given to any Brahmin parent aspiring to adopt a child. Over the years, the Brahmin caste went up in number (99). So, where was the effacement of caste? Even here, Lord Vishnu is said to have left behind the Vasudev caste and Rudra the Vayuputras (395-6).

The Chandravanshi capital Swadeep has more potholes than roads. Encroachments are the order of the day. There was constant tension between the rich home-owning class and the poor landless who lived in slums. The emperor had legalized all encroachments established before 1910 BC (372)! The city of Ayodhya surpasses the most passive societies of Europe, as we find the young and the old trying to woo whoever they develop fancy for. In a way, Tripathi has marshalled all elements to create a storyline the like of which is the staple of Bollywood movies.

II

Coming now to a writer of serious fiction who deals with the ancient stories in a manner that is quite different from the likes of Banker and Tripathi. *The Palace of Illusions* by Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni tells the Mahabharata story from Draupadi's point of view. The storyline is original, that is, as understood commonly in India, but the perspective is different here – clearly a feminist one. Divakaruni shows her as an intelligent and shrewd woman who knows how to keep her husbands in check. At the end of the Mahabharata war, she takes up welfare work for the widows of the war until she sets out on a journey to Heaven with her husbands. However, Divakaruni has also discovered love for Karna in Draupadi's heart. As a young girl, she liked Karna but discovered prejudice against him in her brother Drupad and in Krishna. (78). She muses at one point: "I confess: in spite of the vows I made each day to forget Karna, to be a better wife to the Pandavas, I longed to see him again. Each time I entered a room, I glanced up under my veil – I couldn't stop myself – hoping he was there" (130). The angle of promiscuity is in vogue and what better way to sell a novel than to have what sells!

Sensing Draupadi's leanings, Kunti tries to tempt Karna with the offer to make him the sixth husband of Draupadi provided he did not fight his brothers (280). It is so powerful that even when she dies, she meets Karna in ethereal form and her longstanding wish is fulfilled (376). However, there is no such insinuation in the original Ved Vyasa's Mahabharata.

Anand Neelakantan is another novelist who embarked upon retelling of myths from a particular angle, though he too dabbles in the practice of imposing present-day scenario on epical times. His debut novel *Asura: Tale of the Vanquished: Story of Ravana and his People* (2012) which is based upon Ramayana, presents the story from the point of view of Ravana rather than Rama. The narrative is first person account of Ravana and a commoner, Bhadra. Ravana lies on the battlefield and reminisces his past life.

In order to sharpen the edge, the writer portrays Ravana as a destitute boy who depends on step-brother Kuber, owning a business empire that is spread overseas, even for food and feels humiliated: "My early struggles, the pangs of love and abandonment, separation, battles and wars, music and art, they flashed through my mind in no particular order making no sense. Meaningless, like life itself" (13). Unlike Banker, Neelakantan does not show Ravana as imbued with magical powers. Bhadra is a commoner whose viewpoint too is included thus contrasting the viewpoints of the rich versus the poor.

But when Sita is shown as Ravana's daughter which is not the mainstream narrative (as exception, one can quote the Jain text *Paumacariya* which mentions it) and hardly fits in with the story of kidnapping of Sita for the purpose of making her Lanka's queen that is at the root of the war. In showing Sita as Ravan's illicit daughter whom he abducts for her safety at the approach of war with Rama, Neelakantan has banked upon folklores in some regions but are not the mainstream versions of epics.

Neelakantan traces Ravana's parentage to a Maharishi father though he himself was half-caste (16). Yet commonly, he is acknowledged as a great scholar by people and Rama is said to have asked Lakshman to approach him after he lay waiting for his death, to get some lessons in statecraft. Lying on his death bed, Ravana claims: "I wanted to laugh at my enemy; laugh at the foolish men who trusted me and who were now lying all around, headless, limbless and lifeless. I wanted to laugh at the utopian dreams of equality for all men on which I had built an empire" (12). One cannot, however, exonerate him for abducting Sita and then stubbornly waging a mindless war causing immense loss of life of subjects and destruction of Lanka.

The writer is confused about time period -- epical time and the later period when he refers to building of Egyptian pyramids around the time of Ramayana. "When the kings of Egypt were busy building great tombs to bury themselves, the democratic council of the Asura kingdom was busy laying roads, building hospitals, drainage systems…" (21).

Bhadra recounts the story of birth of Sita from the womb of a Brahmin woman impregnated by Ravan. Says Ravan: "I confessed to Mandodari my affair with the Dev Brahmin woman. […] I told her about our daughter and the fear I felt for her. She wept at my betrayal but forgave me" (299). She is sent to the devas and the forecast is that she would be the cause of destruction of the asura race – this is probably a take on the story of Lord Krishna who was considered such a risk for King Kansa, his kinsman and ruler of Mathura.

At the time of Swayamvara, when Rama broke the bow and won Sita, Ravan had reservation about the future of his daughter but acquiesced because of Sita's love for Rama. He vowed to keep a watch on her if ever she faced problems in life. What happened to Soorpanakha was not just cutting of her nose, but according to Neelakantan, "she had suffered from some renegade forest dwellers, who were rumoured to be Nagas or Vanaras or Devas, who had cut off her breasts and nose after raping her" (304). So, how could Ravana let his daughter be with these "dangerous men" and abducted Sita to ensure her safety!

Two Other novels written by him and based upon Mahabharata are part of Ajaya series: *Ajaya: Roll of the Dice* (2013) and *Ajaya: Rise of Kali* (2018) and are published jointly under the title *Ajaya: Epic of the Kaurava Clan* (2018) also. In these two novels, Neelakantan has presented the story from the point of view of Duryodhana, the loser in the war and has therefore, reversed the roles of the Pandavas and the Kauravas with the former being dubbed as the villains and the latter as the righteous ones. Lord Krishna is presented as a manipulator and someone who likes to play God. "If the Kauravas had accepted Krishna's divinity and agreed to whatever he ordained, the Mahabharata war would not have taken place," (17) states Neelakantan in the Author's Note to his 931-page tome *Ajaya: Duryodhana's Mahabharata.* Duryodhana is, therefore, mentioned as Suyodhana in his book. So far as the language is concerned, Neelakantan describes images perfectly but one fails to locate any literary embellishments like striking metaphors. It is mundane language throughout.

III

Another popular novelist Kavita Kane has taken up characters from myths who are not the mainstream ones. The titles of novels tell it all: *Karna's Wife, Sita's Sister, Menka's Choice*, etc. Kane's *Lanka's Princess* is Surpanakha's story that begins with Lord Krishna meeting Kubja, the hunchback sister of Kamsa in Dwapar Yuga and telling her the story of her previous birth when she was Surpanakha and he, Rama. Since he had rejected her then, he wants to make amends, and therefore, turns her into a sweet beauty.

The special feature of Kane's imaginative rendering is that she projects the story across yugas or eras. In the Epilogue of the book, Kane states: Krishna smiled and, in his smile, she could see a certain future, which the unsuspecting woman beside him could not see but who would have to live it once more…" (297). It is explained that many centuries later, Surpanakha would be reborn as Phulwati, daughter of the chief of a clan and meet Lakshman who would be "in love [with] Pabuji [PabG]," and the fiercest warrior of the clan. "They will decide to marry, but on the day of the wedding, he will be called to war, leaving his seven pheras unfinished and his bride alone, to never return, dying on the battlefield. It was like before, Krishna decided – Lakshman the eternal celibate warrior refusing to accept Surpanakha, and she, eternally unrequited in his rejection" (297). Kane's casting the narrative in the mould of Laila and Majnu can be excused but was Lakshman celibate? Didn't he marry Urvashi? In her novel *Sita's Sister*, Kane takes up Urvashi's life as the subject. She also mentions Ravan going uninvited to Mithila to take part in Sita's Swayamvar in "The Swayamvar" section in this novel as in the novel *Lanka's Princess* (152). That is as in Banker's novel *Siege of Mithila* discussed here, but fails to break Shiva's bow.

IV

Devdutt Pattanaik, who has churned out a large number of books based on Indian myths and legends, is also a very popular writer. Apart from his books on the deities Vishnu, Shiva, Hanuman et al, he has discussed the concepts of myth, heaven, etc. He is a management consultant, who quotes mythology to buttress his management lessons also. Even though he calls himself a mythologist, he can be better appreciated as a fictionist.

Taking up Pattanaik's *Jaya*, one is impressed by the writer's quest like a researcher for hidden meanings. As an example, we take up the section 'Bhima and the Nagas' (Pattanaik 73), which tells about the Duryodhana's jealousy towards the Pandavas during their boyhood days. They would quarrel on issues like succession to the throne. The Pandavas, though qualified by the law of the original bloodline, were opposed by Duryodhana. They also felt dejected because their mother was a widow and they had no clout at the court. On the other hand, Bhima was a bullying sort of whom Duryodhana was sick. So, one day, Duryodhana offered sweets laced with poison and when Bhima became unconscious, Duryodhana, along with other Kaurava brothers, threw him into the river. But as fate would have it, he was saved by the Nagas living in the river. They then took him to their king Vasuki who recognized Bhima as related to the Nagas by bloodline. He gave Bhima a potion to make him insular to poison in future.

The different issues in the story have been commented upon by Pattanaik and out of the five boxed comments, at least three deserve mention here. The first point focusses on the moot issue: "Who should be the king – the eldest son or the fittest son? A child belonging to the original bloodline or

anyone with the right capability? Vyasa ponders on this point throughout the epic" (Pattanaik 74). The third point refers to the Tamil folktale that says that believing Bhima to be dead, the feast as a part of his last rites was being prepared when Bhima appeared much to the pleasure of the Pandavas, but he insisted on going ahead with the feast as the preparations had been made. He mixed up the vegetables cut for the purpose with coconut milk. This dish called 'aviyal' is still prepared in Tamilnadu. The intent behind narrating this fact is to show how the ordinary people today continue to retain contact with those times.

The fifth point says that while staying with the Nagas, Bhima was married to a Naga girl from whom he later had a son known as Barbareek in Rajasthani folktales and Bilalsen in Oriya folk literature. This further underlines the reach and sweep of the mythical tales across the length and breadth of India. Pattaniak's work *Sita* is a version of Ramayana that presents Sita's viewpoint. He also quotes different facts and figures about Ramayana through several tables. For instance, the name of Sita's mother is different across multiple versions of Ramayana. Comparing Devdutt Pattanaik's approach with Amish Tripathi's, a critic comments, "Ramayana is still the story of the legendary hero Rama, there are no antagonistic thoughts in Sita's mind against her husband who disowned her because of a petty washerman. There isn't much of fictitious layering in the story which differentiates it from Amish's Shiva Trilogy" (Jha).

Devdutt Pattanaik's re-tellings are a mix of graphics and summaries of epical tales which gives the feel of an episodic novel. These are impressive, though scholars have found his research shoddy and viewpoint subjective as also ideological (left, brahman-basher). They have been particularly irked by the inaccurate etymologies of Sanskrit words, and have concluded that Pattanaik does not know Sanskrit. There is certainly merit in this criticism, as for example, Sanskrit scholar Nityanand Mishra points out that the meaning of *Karan shareer* given as "social body", as in *My Gita* (190) has no linkage with the widely accepted meaning. Similarly, defining *adhyatma* as "personal mind", *Brahman* as impersonal mind, and confusing man with manas have raised heckles of Sanskrit scholars. Well-known Indologist Rajiv Malhotra finds Pattanaik pandering to western audience through interpretation in western terms and his obsession with themes like sex and LGBT. ("Demolishing"). Yet, if we treat his writings not as accurate non-fiction but as fictionalized narratives, then we allow the writer to fiddle with the given narrative and lend his/her subjective touch to the myth. If that is condoned, Pattanaik has his own take in deriving lessons for the management of modern life.

Classification

Having surveyed these representative novels, we can classify them in the following categories:
The first type of fiction came from the pen of serious scholars like C. Rajagopalachari or R.K. Narayan (*The Ramaayana* based on Kamba Ramaayana) who have presented the epics in original form though in highly abridged form. These writers did their work before the 1980s when postmodernism became the flavour of Indian English fiction. This class of writers is almost extinct now.

The second type relates to authors who take the authentic storyline as a cover or as an allegory like Shashi Tharoor used the Mahabharata protagonists as "walking metaphors" (Dhar 210) in his acclaimed novel *The Great Indian Novel* wherein we find Indira Gandhi depicted as Priya Duryodhani, Mahatma Gandhi as Dev Dutta, Subhash Bose as Pandu and so on, and the electoral battle as the Mahabharata war! The reader knows that he is not perusing the original epic but some borrowed images and names from it. This category can also subsume writers who present the story from the viewpoint of the antagonist or sidelined characters. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Kavita Kane, et al indulge in this practice. It does require some changes in character traits, event description, atmosphere, surroundings but these are and ought to be minimal so as not to affect the original storyline. That will require power of imagination on the part of the novelist.

The third type is of writers who analyze the stories to bring out a lesson for the present. Devdutt Pattanaik does go in for some research and then brings out lessons in clear form, as against the covert form as done by the ancient masters. One need not agree to Pattanaik's interpretation or analysis, but surely this approach is different from that of a novelist who re-writes the events and re-draws the contours of characters. There are several management gurus who analyze the epical stories these days to underline lessons for the managers.

The fourth type of fiction comes from the authors who dabble in re-telling *a la* freestyle wrestling. Authors like Ashok Banker, Amish Tripathi, Anand Neelakantan et al, go about freely distorting mythical storylines, imposing present-day scenario on bygone times, humanizing, and even demonizing divine figures without concern for the deeper message that is sought to be conveyed by ancient masters. In our times, the lure of lucre and the license validated by the postmodern thought have combined to motivate writers to take liberty with these texts raising concerns about the impact on culture and the process of acculturation of younger generation.

Assessment

While the artistic and the managerial approaches in re-tellings have their value, the fourth type goes about violating all boundaries and not knowing any yardsticks. This type, therefore, deserves close scrutiny. In this regard, the following observations deserve mention:

Western impact: For Indian authors, following the western trends is quite common. The Indian authors penning re-tellings are most influenced by the western literary texts. There have been books and movies which have re-told the biblical stories and even questioned the divine status of Christ.[1] These have encouraged Indian writers to re-tell stories of epical characters and divine figures.

Another factor that influences the Indian authors and critics are the literary and cultural theories coming from the West. The western academy has been very active on this front and has been churning out one theory after the other. For one, they place all epics dealing with events of remote past – uncharted by history – in the category of myths which they take to be false. The western tools for analyzing an epic come from psychology and anthropology. This is way different from how the Indians treat these epics.

Further, the postmodern questioning of logos, of all established truths, truisms, boundaries and treating hierarchies as fictitious takes away the hallow surrounding revered texts. The colonial hangover makes the western ideologues believe their views universally applicable like scientific principles even as these apply to different geographical, social and cultural contexts. In this, the Indian theory of literature is completely ignored.

Re-tellers' plea: Writers of re-tellings believe that since there have been many versions of our epics earlier also by poets like Kamban, Krittivas, Tulsidas et al, so they too are justified in giving out their versions. A.K. Ramanujan's famous essay "Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" is often cited in this context, even as he too considers Valmiki's Ramayana as the ur-text. He deals with the authentic text as katha and the re-tellings as kavya likening the duo the French sujet/recit or the English story/discourse. (3). The example that he devotes many pages to concerns the difference between the two versions of Ahalya in Valmiki and Kampan (6).

Somewhat similar is the take by Namita Gokhale when she comments in the introduction to an anthology edited by her: "Indian myth is never static, it is constantly in the process of reinterpreting and revalidating itself, and the society that it defines. Perhaps it is time to seek a new image of Sita – one who does not have to return to the Earth, but can resolutely reclaim it" (7).

Not only in India, but away from India also, the seeds of Ramayana were sown by the Chola and Pallava empires which left their cultural imprint in the entire South East Asia. Thus, the Ramayana, known as *Ramaakien* in Thailand has an Ayodhya in Bangkok and their present king is the descendent of Lord Rama. As far away as Indonesia, the Rama story is enacted and celebrated as part of culture.

Surely, all these examples go in favour of the re-tellers. However, there is a vital difference. The present re-tellers do not create stories as devotees. It is the lure of the lucre that motivates them. The real reason can be the large market in foreign countries for new stories[2] that are titillating and exotic.

Indian historiography: The attitude of ancient Indians towards historiography must also be kept in mind. There is no doubt that the Indian mind, possessed as it was by deeper and more permanent rather than temporal and ephemeral questions of life and world, hated noting down historical details the way the Westerners did. They did, however, meticulously note down their findings from experiments in the spiritual field as the Upanishads amply show it. As for the Ramayana and Mahabharata, these laid down the ideals to be followed in individual, social, political and cultural fields of human activity. Talking of the Mahabharata, Barucha righlty avers that it is "not merely a great narrative poem, it is our *itihasa*, the fundamental source of knowledge for our literature, dance, painting, sculpture, theology, statecraft, sociology, ecology – in short, our history in all its detail and density" (quoted in Dhar 230). For the ancient Indian scholars, however, the myths served as parables for the common man with his limited intelligence; for the enlightened ones were the Vedas and the Upnishads with their dry logic and maxims. The enlightened spiritual masters of our times interpret myths differently. A case in point is Jaggi Vasudeva's interpretation of the Shiva Purana, wherein he finds the scientific theories of the contemporary world explained in story form[3].

Indian epics and Puranas do have elements that smack of exaggeration, magic and supernatural for modern man, but the real objective in producing these works has always been considered as a moral one. The plea advanced by the re-tellers that they mean to humanize divine characters is misplaced. Indian epics and Puranas are meant for human beings and the message is that even the gods had to suffer in human form and yet they trod the righteous path. Rama going for *Vanvaas* or living as a forester and losing his wife to an abductor, feeling pangs of separation, building a bridge to cross the sea, etc. are acts which they experience as human beings. Rama as also Krishna are born and die as humans. What else is needed to humanize them?

Impacting culture: Creating discourse: There is a growing tendency to manipulate the myths to create interesting accounts which then are lapped up by ordinary readers as factually correct. Take for example, Ashwin Sanghi's *The Keepers of the Kalachakra* in which illustrations and graphics have been given as if these were true. Even though it is mentioned in the preface that the book is a work of fiction, the growing number of such distorted accounts do create a particular discourse. Terminology like subversion, irreverence are dear to postmodern thinkers, but devaluing our hallowed figures of past whom we look upon as icons to be followed, hurts the religious sentiments of Indians. Does it not create the hierarchical binary secular/religious? The way the elite (read unbelievers) have the right to ride roughshod over feelings of believers, howsoever, misguided they may take the latter to be, is nothing less than undemocratic arrogance and an affront to human rights.

This discourse controls the subject, i.e., the young mind for whom Rama and Krishna may not mean the ideals of a race but only cardboard characters like Batman and Superman. This is utter trivialization of valued iconic figures of our culture. The moot question that should bother us is: Whether, by taking away the mystique and the aura from the characters like Rama and by bestowing upon them the traits of a 'pure imaginary', as has been sought to be done to the idea of nation, are we not taking away from society something vital for its existence? Are we sure there is no need for any icons and ideals at all in a society which is witness to constant degradation of values in every field?

Conclusion

The problem is not the multiple versions of hallowed cultural texts because with the free flow of information across the world, a cultural give-and-take is unavoidable. But there is danger inherent in essentializing, i.e., stereotyping things under the impact of globalization which is heavily tilted in favour of the western paradigms of knowledge, lifestyle, cultural values, etc. The demise of a culture is the loss of a sustainable lifestyle and thought that is conducive to the soil where it has been existent. Not for nothing are the ancient practices like Yoga appealing to mankind now. This was possible due to the existence of ancient knowledge system and lived experience.

The point worth pondering that emerges from this study is that with the fast changes taking place in lifestyle, custom, food habits, etc. of people following globalization (read 'westernization'), how unrelated will the next generations feel to their native culture unless re-tellings in contemporary style are done by serious writers. The problem lies in the blind application of western yardstick – born of the colonial mindset – to something that has been produced in a different – here, Indian context. The discourse born of power relations does not fashion the text here because Valmiki, who produced the first Ramayana, was not driven by the desire to maintain hegemony or to earn the big buck. He was a spiritual seeker, who had broken bonds with society in the true tradition of ascetics and sought spiritual rather than material treasures. Indian myths are also structured on the clash between virtue and vice but ultimately it is the virtue or Dharma that must win in the Indian dialectic mode.

Judged on the basis of Indian poetics, we find that it enjoins upon literature (*sahitya*) the responsibility to promote the welfare of all and to uphold dharma, the sense of righteousness of thought and deed at the level of individual and society. The Indian myths retain for posterity what is of eternal value and let pass by what is ephemeral aberration. Let us recognize that "Without *smirti* [generic term for epics as also for memory], the life-giving memory of what generations have cherished and passed on, entire communities are known to capitulate to the prevalent or dominant culture" (Paranjape 123).

Notes

1. Some of such books are: Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952), which re-tells the stories of Cain and Abel; Philip Pullman's *The Good Man Jesus and The Scoundrel Christ* (2010) which deals with Jesus and Christ as two brothers – the former a godly person but the latter a manipulative figure who uses the former's image to build a church; Colm Toibin's *The Testament of Mary* (2012) written from the POV of Christ's mother who muses on her son's life and his divine status; and Christopher Moore's *The Gospel according to Biff, Christ's childhood pal* (2002), which is a humorous book dealing with the "lost" years of Jesus Christ.

2. A British publisher interviewed at Hay Literary Festival, UK 2016 mentioned that the future of book publishing in literary field lay with the Indian authors because the British and European writers had no new stories to offer. (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XOw77SglexI)

3. In the Shiva Purana stories, you will see that the Theory of Relativity, Quantum Mechanics – the whole of modern physics – has been very beautifully expressed. But somewhere along the way people dropped the science, and the stories were exaggerated from generation to generation to a point of being absolutely ridiculous. If you put the science back into the stories it is a beautiful way to express the science. The Shiva Purana is the highest science of elevating human nature to the very peak of consciousness, expressed in beautiful stories. Yoga has been expressed in the form of a science without stories attached to it, but if you look at it in a deeper sense, yoga and the Shiva Purana cannot be separated. One is for those who like stories, another is for those who are willing to look at everything scientifically but the fundamentals of both are the same. Today scientists are suggesting that one of the best ways to impart education is to impart it in the form of stories or in the form of play. (Interactions)

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