Oray Publications
Research Journal Of English(RJOE) Vol-3,Issue-4,2018
www.rjoe.co.in An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal ISSN: 2456-2696

PERSPECTIVAL RE-RENDERING OF MYTH IN M.T. VASUDEVAN NAIR'S BHIMA: LONE WARRIOR

Ms.Ashwathy P V R
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of Commerce (B Com),
SIES (N) College of Arts, Sci., & Com
Nerul, Navi Mumbai.

Dr.Pratima Das
Associate Professor,
Head, Dept. of English
Smt. CHM College of Arts,
Ulhasnagar, Thane Dist

Abstract

Perspective is a factor that lies at the heart of a narrative. It is conditioned by the characteristics of a narrator - whether author driven or character driven, whether rendered in first person or third person, and whether intrusive or non-intrusive. It, thereby, helps determine the purpose and intent of the very exercise of narration. Thus, it is the most crucial choice that an author makes to tell a story, more so in an act of retelling. For, a change in perspective is what enables a reinterpretation and retelling of an existing narrative in the first place. Thus, perspective holds a pivotal position in the narratives of Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction that aim to retell an existing mythological narrative from a new perspective .Accordingly, to exemplify how a select perspective defines the exercise of retelling, this research paper undertakes a study of the Mythofiction *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013), a translation of M. T. Vasudevan Nair's popular Malayalam novel *Randamoozham* (1984)by Gita Krishnankutty to English. It attempts to establish how the chosen perspective of Bhima, the second eldest of the Pandavas, in the novel allows the author a scope for a creative revision of the Indian epic *Mahabharata* originally conceived by Sage Vyasa. Subsequently, it rationalizes Nair's attempt at depicting the disappointment and resentment suffered by Bhima for always being the second in turn, and allowing the character to rightfully express himself. Thus, the paper reinforces the significance of perspective in a retelling.

Conclusively, it suggests that Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction may be considered for a study in the light of theoretical discourses like Narratology, Adaptation Studies, Comparative Literature, and Comparative Mythology.

Key Words: Perspective, Retelling, Indian Mythological Fiction, Mytho-fiction / Mythofiction, Revisionism

In the words of Burkhard Niederhoff, a scholar of narrative theory, perspective is "the way the representation of the story is influenced by the position, personality and values of the narrator, the characters and, possibly, other more hypothetical entities in the storyworld" (1). Therefore, it is the most crucial choice that an author makes to tell a story, for "narratives have at least one narrator and usually more than one character and thus offer the possibility for a range of, and change of, perspectives" (Niederhoff 1). Depending on whether the narration is author driven or character driven, whether rendered in first person or third person, and whether intrusive or non-intrusive, a given perspective helps to determine the purpose and intent of the very exercise of narration. Accordingly, perspective plays a pivotal role in a narrative, more so in the case of revisionist narratives like Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction.

Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction is a genre of popular literature that has flourished in the recent times. It attempts to reinterpret and offer a new perspective on an extant mythological narrative. As the term suggests, it is a combination of mythology and fiction, in other words it is a by-product of the original narrative combined with the author's imagination. Thus, it becomes revisionist in nature, for it is the change in perspective that enables a retelling in the first place. Therefore, such works may be studied toexemplify how a select perspective defines the exercise of retelling.

Accordingly, this research paper undertakes the Mythofiction *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013), Gita Krishnankutty's English translation of M. T. VasudevanNair's popular Malayalam novel *Randamoozham*(1984), for a scrutiny in validation of the aforesaid premise.

M. T. Vasudevan Nair is an accomplished writer whose multifarious contributions have an indispensable place in the repertoire of Malayalam literature as also Malayalam films. Be it any form of writing– novel, short stories, screenplay – Nair has experimented and excelled at them all. He is celebrated mainly for the local colour writing that captures the nuances of the Nair community with its orthodox and patriarchal practices against the backdrop of the Communist regime in Kerala. In addition, he is celebrated for pioneering a revisionist style of writing in Malayalam Literature manifested in his screenplay for the Malayalam film *OruVadakkanVeeragadha* (A Northern Folklore of Victory) released in 1989 whereby he retells the tale of a popular legend from the perspective of the antagonist. His success with this stylemade way for another attempt with the revision of the Indian epic *Mahabharat* by Vyasa in his seminal work *Randamoozham* (Second Turn) published in 1984. Translated into English by Gita Krishnankuttyas *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013), his*Randamoozham*gave the audience a new version of the epic retold from Bhima's perspective. Thus, the author established a new style of writing termed as "Perspective Writing" thereby suggesting how a perspective in a narrative allowed for creative experimentations with telling and retelling. Nair, therefore, may be identified as one of the early writers of what is today identified as Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction, and his work *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013) clearly befits the purpose of this study.

To begin with, the *Mahabharat*originally written by Sage Vyasa is a story of dispute between the Pandavas and the Kauravas– two branches of the Kuruclan of warriors - over the right to rule the kingdom of Hastinapur. This frame narrative is rendered amidst a myriad of intersecting sub-narratives on multiple characters, and thus is "an infinite dimensional vector space … revealing to someone who is willing to take a plunge deep within, to whom all the hidden and subtle dimensions become apparent" (Pillai). Hence, this narrative can be approached from multiple perspectives and be reinterpreted, retold or revised in many ways. Thus, it may be established that M. T. Vasudevan Nair's attempt at retelling the epic from the

perspective of Bhima, the second eldest of the Pandavas, as a creative endeavour is reasonable. According to Nair, Bhima is a character in the *Mahabharata* whose greatness remains eclipsed within the pages of the narrative. He believes that Bhima is beyond the larger-than-life, pot-bellied character represented therein; he rather sees "a human being beset with unfulfilled longings, haunted by doubts and fear, and often ridiculed and misunderstood by people around him" (Krishnankutty, Gita. Translator's Note. Nair 376). He finds him to be a lonely warrior - one who fights numerous battles for others single-handedly, one who is singled-out of the group owing to his physique, and one who faces internal and external conflicts all by himself. Therefore, the author revises the tale of Mahabharata in *Bhima: Lone Warrior* (2013) combining mythological facts and his imagination,to lend a voice to Bhima's perception of himself, and that of people and events around him. Accordingly, Nair deftly employs a combination of narrative voices – third person omniscient narration and first person narration to retell Bhima's tale, in opposition to the "camera" view used in the original. Thereby, he distinguishes Bhima's narrative from the original, and establishes how a change in perspective becomes central to the exercise of retelling.

In his retelling, Nair retains the basic plot of *Mahabharata* originally conceived by Vyasa, but renders it in eight sections – each of which comprises subsections – with Bhima at its centre.However, he begins the narrative with a brief note in commemoration of the members of the Kuru clan:

Sootas and magadhas, let us sing ballads about the Kuru race once more.(Nair 1)
Here, the author uses the third person pronoun *us* to place himself amongst the Sootas (traditional storytellers) and the people of Magadha (a province in ancient India), and underlines his role as an omniscient storyteller in the narrative. Further, with the phrase *once more*, he makes it explicit that the following narrative is a retelling.

In the first section of the narrative, the omniscient third person author- narrator follows the minds of the characters relating their thoughts on the aftermath of the Kurukshetra war. However, he begins with Yudishtira and moves on to Arjuna, Nakula, Sahadeva, and then Draupadi saving Bhima for the last. He, thereby, makes it evident to the readers that he is giving voice to Bhima's perception of others and their thoughts. Nair clearly indicates this in expressing Bhima's bewilderment at his brothers' indifference towards Drauapdi who falls owing to fatigue and his pain on seeing a semi-conscious Draupadi disappointed to find Bhima by her side instead of the others. Having, thus, established the focus on Bhima, the author then paves way for a retelling of the narrative as Bhima would have it; just that the narrator loses the third person voice of the author and shifts to the first person voice of the character. Thus, from section two to eight (The Murmurs of a Cyclone', 'Forest Trails', 'The Lure of the Dice', 'Flowers in Kubera's Garden', 'Kingdom of Virata', 'Tattered Clothes', 'The Inheritance'), the author lets the readers hear Bhima's version of various events.

In his narration, Bhima embarks on a journey down the memory lane recallingall the instances from the past that culminated in the Kurukshetra war and the present journey of the Pandavas. Though his narrative covers the same people and incidents as in the original version of *Mahabharata*, his perspective on them reveals his mindscape and the irony of his life. He shows how Bhima, the mighty son of Vayu (Wind God) and the second eldest of the Pandavaswas discriminated and misrepresented as a warrior, son, and husband.
The first part of Bhima's narrative titled 'The Murmurs of a Cyclone' starts with the arrival of Pandavas at Hastinapur after the death of their father Pandu and his second wife Madri. Here,

Bhima focuses on his identity crisis as an individual and Kshatriya experienced during his growing up years. In the very beginning itself, Bhima establishes how the exaggerated tale of the Sootas about his birth became the first instance of misrepresentation of his identity. When the Pandavas were being introduced for the first time to the people of Hastinapur, Bhima says:

> They stood respectfully before Yudhishtira, who was only a year older than I, palms joined. Yudishtira would be a king in future… The visitor paid their respects to Arjuna as well, since he was going to be the greatest of archers. Before they left, they recalled the story of the strange child who had fallen down from someone's arms as soon as he was born and, instead of being injured, had shattered the rock on which he fell. So they came and looked at me with amazement. Pretending to hold me close and caress me they pressed various spots on my body, testing its strength… I hid my embarrassment. Was my build so different from that of other children? (Nair 27)

Thus, instead of establishing his worth as the mighty son of Vayu, Bhima suggests how the story of the Sootas sows seeds of self-doubt in him. Further, Bhima talks of the name Vrikodara (wolf-bellied) which adds to crisis:

> The name Mother had given me with such affection became a nickname that people in the kitchen area called me scornfully. And once it reached the outer halls and courtyard, it became a synonym for Bhimasena. Every time I heard it, anger would course through me. (Nair 34)

Here again, Bhima tells his readers how he became a point of ridicule because his own mother let out something personal to a random servant without considering the impact it might have on him and his image. Further, he talks of multiple occasions wherein he is called a "blockhead" and dismissed as unintelligent, and wrongly labelled as aggressive and ill-tempered for instigating a quarrel while it isDuryodhana who was to be blamed. To challenge all this and prove himself worthy as a Kshatriya, Bhima prays to the Wind God, "Give me your blessings and make me exceedingly strong. Let yout son, Bhimasena, be the first in rank in the use of all weapons" (Nair 38).

However, he experiences discrimination despite the skills he develops as a warrior. For instance, during a hunting expedition in the forest, the ten year old Arjuna brings down a huge buck and receives appreciation for his feat; however when an eleven year old Bhima kills a wild boar that attacks him, his valour and presence of mind in the face of death go unacknowledged. Instead, he is reprimanded by Yudhishtira for moving away from the group and almost getting killed by the boar.

Further, Bhima informs his audience that he was better than Yudhisthiraat fighting from the chariot and could have been a better archer than Arjuna, but was imposed with lessons on waging war with the mace instead:

> While I was studying chariots, my teacher realized that I has overtaken Yudhisthira in this field, although he had started earlier than me.. Instead of letting me go on with my training in the use of chariots, Dronacharya moved me away from it. Maybe because he assumed I would never make a name as an archer, he sent me to join Arjuna and Ashvathama… Drona must have decided that, being heavy-built, I would be slow at pulling out an arrow and placing it in the bow. He could then say, 'Blockhead, a mace is best for you.'… He had already decided the limits to which each of his disciples would exploit their skills. (Nair 65)

Bhima suffers yet again, on the day of the exhibition of skills in the presence of the royal family

and people of Hastinapur. After Yudhisthira displays his skills with the chariot, Bhima, comes second in turn and displays the archery skills he had acquired secretly with his personal trainer Vishoka, Here, he says:

> Dronacharya came hurrying towards me. 'Show them how you wage war with the mace. There are many others after you to demonstrate skills in archery. Combat with the mace, the mace!' … I gave my bow and arrow back to Vishoka and, seething with anger picked up the mace from the floor of the chariot." (Nair 69)

Even when he combats Duryodhana with the mace, he shows exemplary strength and technique in wielding the weapon unto his advantage. But, as he is close to his victory over his opponent the elders intervene and stop Bhima reminding him that it was not a battle.

However, in the rest of his narration, Bhima proves how this same Kshatriya, whose potentials were undermined in comparison to his other brothers, becomes the reason for the survival of the Pandavas and their historic victories on many occasions: Bhima is the one who carries mother Kunti and Yudhistira to safety while escaping the plot of the lac palace, he is the one who kills the mighty tribalsHidamba and Baka, it is Bhima's presence of mind and chariot skills that protect Arjuna and Draupadi from the riot at King Drupada's palace after the swayamwar, it is because of Bhima's efforts that the Pandavas win over Jarasandha, and last but not the least, the defeat of Duryodhana in theKurukshetra war is also possible because of Bhima.

Further, in opposition to the conventional ones, Bhima's narration exposes his sensitive side hitherto suppressed by the laudable mighty one. Even thoughBhimafeels neglected by his mother, as well as Draupadi who exploit his strength to satisfy their needs, he remains consistently protective and responsible towards them. For instance, he risks his life in a duel with Baka only to honour the promise that Kunti makes. In case of Draupadi, he continues toyearn for his turn with her despite knowing that she was more inclined towards Yudhishtira as his queen and towards Arjuna who had rightfully won her hand in marriage.Yet, heavengesDraupadi's insult in the Kurukshetra war. Be it with the blood of Duryodhana or the saugandhika flowers from King Kubera's garden, Bhima serves Draupadi to the best of his capacity. Yet,when Yudhishtira refuses to take the throne overcome by the guilt of killings in the Kurukshetra war and Bhima stands second in turn to become King, these very women – Kunti and Draupadi – urge him to waive his right. Bhima says that Kunti reprimands him saying that he is "not worthy enough" and knows "nothing about the codes of dharma or political strategy" to rule, while Draupadiasks him to reconsider owing to the fear of losing her position of queen to Bhima's wife Balandhara, when he became the king. At this point, Bhima remarks:

> 'I, a king?Vikodhara, the king of Hastinapur? What foolishness!' I laughed louder. 'A joke my elder brother made… he's always made jokes about me. The blockhead, a king!' … I sank down on my bed, weighed down by the burden of thought. I forgot to laugh. I had governed Hastinapur for a moment, just a single moment. I was a king who had abdicated. I laughed again, in the dark. A mighty man should not weep, after all.(Nair 345)

He expresses a sense of futility in the climax;he realizes that after all his efforts, he would always be nothing but a point of ridicule, the mighty yet unfit one, the second in turn. He is beaten down by the irony of his life, something the Sootas had inadvertently told him long ago. But the anti-climax of his narrative comes in the revelation of his true identity - his tribal

parentage - byKunti who accepts that she bore sons with other men on the behest of her impotent husband Pandu:

> Then my husband, the king, needed a strong man. As strong as the God of the Wind.A man of might. I prayed, obediently… He came out of the dense forest. Like an unchained tempest. A forest-dweller whose name I did not know.(Nair 354)

Thus, the conclusive part of his narrative is a resolution to all his questions: Why was he different from the other Pandavas? Why could he never comply with the codes of Kshatriya dharma but found reason in the law of the forest?Why was he animalistic in nature with uncontrollable passion and aggression? Why would Draupadi not shower affection on him? Why, acutally, would Kunti not see him fit to rule? Because he was low born, a tribal!
Towards the end, he thus addresses his audience directly:

> My friends, your grandchildren and later their grandchildren will sit around the fire and sing the stories of Kurukshetra for the generations that follow Parikshit. I do not know who I will be in their alluring narration. Maybe they will laugh [at] a man with a huge belly and a wide mouth… or maybe they will shudder [seeing] the frightening form of a man with the might of 10,000 elephants, standing with his head in the sky and his feet on the earth… Whatever it be, let them go on singing. (Nair 355)

In his conclusive words, Bhima suggests that he there are two sides to his character, both of which he has shared at length in his narrative. However, reminding his audience of the Sootas and their unreliable tales, he wonders which of the two impressions would prevail with the generations to come. However, he articulates his indifference to the future for it is beyond his control, and marks the end of his tale.

Thus, with Bhima's perspective of *Mahabharata*, the author M. T. Vasudevan Nair does not give the audience a new tale but a different dimension of the original. He executes this by redesigning the pattern in which the plot of the original is rendered. In other words, he structures the narrative in such a way that the already established plot, characters, and events from the original display a new colour, and partake in Bhima's quest for identity than the Kurukshetra war. Thus, what Nair achieves with this perspectival re-rendering of the myth is a closure for Bhima, who could never say his piece.

Thus, this study of Nair's *Bhima: Lone Warrior*, concludes that an idea of retelling in a work Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction springs from the plurality of voices inherent in a mythological narrative. Thus, it established that such writing essentially require a perspective to effect a revision, adaptation, or subversion of the original narrative. Summing up, it proposes that works classified as Mythofiction / Mytho-fiction may be in turn studied in the light of theoretical discourses like Narratology, Adaptation Studies, Comparative Literature, and Comparative Mythology.

References:

- Nair, M. T. Vasudevan. *Bhima: Lone Warrior*. Translated by Gita Krishnankutty, Harper Perennial, 2013. Print.
- Niederhoff, Burkhard. "Perspective – Point of View". *The Living Handbook of Narratology*, 11 Jun. 2011, wiki.sub.uni-hamburg.de/lhn/index.php/Perspective_-_View&oldid=1515. Web.
- Pillai, Akash. "A Review of M. T. Vasudevan Nair's *Randamoozham*". *Skeptipolitico*, 23 Sept. 2012, akashacharyaindia.blogspot.com/2012/09/a-review-of-randamoozham-by-mt.html?m=1. Web.