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A Study of Narrative Structures in The Novel Duryodhana by V. Raghunathan

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Abstract

Every story, novel, poem or essay is a form of narration. The activity of narration isn't specific to various genres of literature. We can notice it in different forms of reports, accounts and articles as well. In fictional writings, selecting a proper manner to tell the story is not less important than the story itself. The present paper not only studies certain structures but also how they are employed in the novel *Duryodhana* (2014) written by Vishwanathan Raghunathan. V. Raghunathan is a Tamilian. He was born in Ambala, Haryana in 1954 and completed most of his schooling at Jammu and Kashmir. He graduated from Panjab University, Chandigarh and received his doctorate in finance from IIM, Calcutta. He taught finance at Indian Institute of Management, Ahmadabad for almost two decades. He has been president of ING Vyasa Bank from 2001 to 2004. Currently he is CEO of GMR Varalakshmi Foundation since 2005. He writes columns for The Economic Times and The Times of India. He has also been an adjunct professor at Bocconi University, Milan, Italy and at Schulich School of Business, York University, Toronto, Canada. *Duryodhana* attempts to retell *The Mahabharata* from Duryodhana's point of view. Duryodhana is the narrator of the text and he declares that he is inspired in this venture by his friend Karna who retold his story in Shivaji Sawant's *Mrityunjaya*. He begins the story from a brief introduction of his ancestors. He is not happy with the fact that for ages he is painted in black, while there was grey shade to both the parties involved in the battle of Mahabharata.

Keywords: narrative, narratology, Duryodhana, Mahabharata, mythology, Raghunathan.

Introduction

Matthew Garrett (2018) in the Introduction to the book *The Cambridge Companion to Narrative Theory* writes that narrative theory is "the theory of how stories work and how we make them work." (p. 1)

To narrate things is a human compulsion. Stories, events and various other aspects of the world are presented in the narrative form. The theorists of narratology study the structures of narratives because narratology considers fictional narratives to be formal and systematic structure. Instead of analyzing particular stories this theory emphasizes the study of those elements which are common in all the stories. Paul Cobley (2014) in his book *Narrative* writes:

Wherever there are humans there appear to be narratives. It is true that people tell stories about life history (Gee 1991) and about their psyches (Schafer 1983; Spence 1987) ... Pronouncing that certain event in the world of human experience 'make a good story' invariably carries with it the contention that those events can be reduced to a few crude principles, that stories are very 'basic' ways of thinking about the world. (p. 2)

In three hundred and odd pages in *Duryodhana* the entire life of the title character is covered including his birth, childhood, marriage, and all the ups and downs he goes through and lastly the rumors and false narratives spread after his death. We don't frequently encounter the mimetic form of telling throughout and wherever we do it is mostly things said by Duryodhana to others. Not only it gives pace to the story it also reveals one side of his nature that how sloth he was in giving ear to others and how ready he was to dictate. Though in the beginning part he takes some time in presenting his childhood events, still the narrative has its pace. This pace increases even more when he skips the whole episode of the Mahabharata

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war with just a single statement that it is already known to all. So, while reading the text one feels a little giddy with the sheer speed that it has got, especially in the second half. The internal focalization is more frequent when the narrator is omniscient and we don't have any example of it in Duryodhana. He doesn't have the power to get into the heads of others. He just strives to guess and imagine what others might be thinking like an average human being. When thoughts and feelings of the characters are presented, it is known as internal focalization and when the narrator presents the actions of narrators, which are observable, it is known as external focalization.

In 'external' focalization the viewpoint is outside the character depicted... that is, what the characters say and do, these being things you would hear and see for yourself if you were present at the scene depicted. In the opposite, 'internal focalization', the focus is on ... things which would be inaccessible to you even if you had been present. (Barry 2012, p. 224)

If certain events of a story travel backwards in time, it is known as flashback and when events travel forth in time, it is known as flash forward.

Sometimes the story will 'flash back' to relate an event which happened in the past, and such parts of the narrative can be called 'analeptic' (from 'analepsis', which literally means a 'back-take'). Likewise, the narrative may 'flash forward' to narrate, or refer to, or anticipate an event which happens late: such parts of the narrative can be called 'proleptic' (from 'prolepsis', which literally means a 'fore-take'). (Barry 2012, p. 226)

Duryodhana goes back into the time to tell his life history long after he is dead in the novel Duryodhana in order to set his record right. Duryodhana's use of contemporary terms, such as 'hot seat', 'pause button', and the game of 'cricket', etc. also exemplify flash forward in between a long flash back. Besides there are so many back and forth in times are presented in the narrative as the narrator, Duryodhana, himself declares in the following lines:

Before I proceed with my account of our story, let me make a comment – a sort of disclaimer. The problem with our complex family history, which is as far flung in geography as in time, is that we can often tell you nothing about any one episode in our lives without telling you about another episode at another time or place that caused the first episode, and then something else again that caused the second episode, and so on, so that touching on any single story from our lives ends up setting off a whole chain reaction, like so many dominoes. By the time you return to the story of your original interest, you may well have lost track of it. So, every now and then, I may need to make excursions away from the main story, and the onus shall be upon you to keep track of the main line of my narration. (Raghunathan 2014, p. 2)

A narrator who uses first person pronouns in his commentary and presents the things from first person point of view is known as the first-person narrator. Readers see the world around the narrator through his eyes as he presents his opinions, feelings and thoughts. It is one of the commonly used narrative forms. Since, the first-person narrator is personally involved in the storyline in some way or the other, he tells the readers only those things which are personally witnessed or experienced by him. For this same reason, this type of narrator is not considered much reliable at certain times. In the stories in which the protagonist is

appointed as the narrator this form of narrative is used. In such story the narrator talks about the events selected from his personal life, and he is thus the chief focus of the narration. If the first-person narrator is a secondary character in the story, he is known as a witness narrator and the focus of the narration is removed from the narrator. The first-person narrative makes the readers feel like as if the narrator is directly speaking to them and that they are able to listen to his thoughts. The way of speaking will be that of talking in ordinary life, the only difference is a better grammar and more refined speech. A kind of closeness with the narrator is created and we connect to him pretty easily.

The other kind of narrator is the kind who identifies as a distinct, named character, with a personal history, gender, a social-class, position, distinct likes and dislikes, and so on. These narrators have witnessed, or learned about, or even participated in the events they tell. They can be called 'overt' or 'dramatised' or 'intrusive' narrators. (Barry 2012, p. 225-26)

Duryodhana is presented in the first-person narrative. Duryodhana presents his own account in the novel long after he is dead, so he is the protagonist of the novel. Here is an example of the first-person narrative from Duryodhana. Talking about Krishna, he says:

In our times, he was regular enough to die a common men's death – by a stray hunter's poisoned arrow when resting in a forest. I am happy that at least I died a brave king's death, which brought down the curtain on a war that I do not believe I started or asked for. (Raghunathan 2014, p. 17)

When a narrator speaks to another character in the story or addresses the readers directly and thus uses a lot of second person pronouns, he is called second person narrator. Like the first-person narrator, the second person narrator recounts only personally gathered experiences and emotions. Present tense is used in such kind of narration. This kind of narrative is not so much common in literature. A narrator that is detached from the action of the narrative and presents his commentary using third person pronouns is called third person narrative. A third person narrator is always neutral and unbiased in his point of view and the most reliable one on that.

The rules of traditional storytelling method in which a single speaker presents a single point of view are bent in multiple narrative technique in which multiple narrators recount various stories within a story or smaller accounts which are unified into a story, that means they can either present a single story from various perspectives or fragments of a single story. The effect of multiple narrative can also be created with a single speaker telling the story at various points of time in his life, for example some parts of the story as a youth and the other as an old person. Though the novel Duryodhana employs the traditions single narrator method yet the various stages of his life that he passes through and the entry of various characters in different stages add an extra flavor to the narrative. Duryodhana has his entire life saved in his memory as he declares that it's been long since he was dead.

Duryodhana by V. Raghunathan is a posthumous narrative. The narrator declares it in the very beginning chapter when he says:

Considering I didn't set much store by what others thought of me when I was alive, it would be uncharacteristic of me to give two hoots about what the world thinks of me now,

when I am long dead. All I care for is that I lived my life being true to myself and to the higher interests of my lineage and God-ordained role – that is my rajadharma. (Raghunathan 2014, p. 18)

The narrator tells us that the inspiration to tell his story from his perspective came to him from his close friend Karna's narrative presented in Shivaji Sawant's novel *Mrityunjaya*. Anticipating the probable question from his audience about the need of presenting another story of The Mahabharata when we already have it, he asks a question in return following the fashion of epic argument. The question is whether or not his audience wants to see another aspect of the traditional story of the famous epic, which would actually be just the opposite aspect. He accuses Vyasa for maliciously painting him and his party in all black, even though he had nothing against him in particular. Following Vyasa, other narrators came and they all upheld the tradition to keep depicting his dark side only. He has grievances against Drona for being partial in his teaching, his parents for being gullible, Kunti and Krishna for conspiring against him, Pandavas for being evil by nature, Bhima Particularly more than the rest and so on. He kept so many grievances suppressed for so long, but finally Karna rose up from the dead, presented his narrative, consequently giving him an idea and a goal. He mentions Sawant's novel again in the middle of his narrative and calls it Karna's first victory over casteist Drona. Thus, through this posthumous narrative Duryodhana paints the Pandavas and company in dark reversing the traditional narratives. The answer to how far he has been successful in his mission depends upon how a reader reads his narrative. Though, the ironical situation arising from his narrative cannot be overlooked. In his attempt to degrading Krishna, Pandavas, Kunti and others he exposes his follies before the world to justify which he only gives certain lame excuses. Thus, at certain places the narrative gives way.

Lastly talking about certain fumbles in the course of the narrative, in Duryodhana the speaker, as well as the author too, gets confused between the sage Shuka and the sage Shukra widely known as Shukracharya in Hindu mythology. As one goes through the passage in which Shuka is mentioned, it becomes evident that it is not simply a typing mistake or any such thing. Here is an excerpt: "Sage Vyasa had taken it upon himself to narrate his version of the Mahabharata to Maharishi Shukracharya and that roving sage, Narada, for word-of-mouth transmission of his version of the epic" (Raghunathan 2014, p. 7). A little later in the same passage he writes: "It may be that Shuka was a great scholar who would go on to become the presiding guru of the Asuras" (Raghunathan 2014, p. 7).

Anyone who has some basic knowledge on Hindu mythology knows that Shuka was the son and disciple of the sage Vyasa who transmitted Vyasa's version of the epic The Mahabharata as is stated by the narrator, but it was Shukracharya, not Shuka, who was the guru of the Asuras and Shuka and Shukracharya were not at all contemporary. Shukracharya belongs to a time much prior to Shuka. There may be certain possible reasons behind this flaw in information. One is that, the narrator is bent on distorting the names and images of all those who did the same with him. Vyasa and his followers distorted his name as Duryodhana from the original name Suyodhana. So this may be a kind of revenge. The other possible reason is what the narrator says in the same passage a little further: "the

memories of the listeners as they recount stories time and again may not be equally prodigious. So, while transmitting such information, distortions are inevitable" (Raghunathan 2014, p. 7). Though he says it for the listeners, but since he declares at the outset that he is dead long ago, so we can apply the same statement on the memory of a person who is dead long ago. There may be other possible reason as well, such as since this works fall in the category of fiction, so it is not necessary to stick to the names and information provided in the epic The Mahabharata. Of course, it is not necessary, but it is necessary to use a same name for the same character in the same paragraph, especially when two different names belong to two different persons.

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