

## Discourses and Counter Discourses in the Modern Retelling: A Study of V. Raghunathan's *Duryodhana*

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### Abstract

This paper addresses the issues of counter-narrative and subversion in the modern retellings of an Indian myth, the *Mahabharata*. Also, the terms “myth” and “retelling” are given new meanings. V. Raghunathan's novel *Duryodhana* is an appropriate example for modern way of retelling. In this paper this novel is studied through the framework of counter-narrative, resistance of marginalized and subversion. Placing the vanquished Duryodhana as a hero and seeing his life from the positive angle makes the plot more interesting. This type of retelling brings out the new meaning or dimension to the famous episodes of the *Mahabharata* which is not discussed earlier. Giving voice to the marginalized from the new perspective creates more space to interpret the myth in depth. In essence, this paper has viewed the effect of the counter-narrative and subversion in the novel *Duryodhana* and how readers can educate themselves about their myth through this modern retelling.

**Key words:** *Myth, Retelling, Counter-narrative, Subversion and Marginalized*

Writers derive their inspiration from various sources. Their inner conflicts often result in wonderful piece of literature. Some writers try to draw sources from their childhood experiences. Writers are not born in vacuum. They are the part of this society. They live among other people but experience the world in a different way. Some are being affected by the incidents of the society which force to react. Hence the social and cultural problems are also driving the creative writers to express themselves. A few writers turn to myths of their society for the source of their inspiration. They try to reconstruct myths in their process of writing either accepting them or denying. Myths have created this society from generation to generation. Hence there is always a purpose for the writer when he handles the prevailing myths of the society. The study of myth is also rewarding. It helps one to understand its functions in the society and also in the creative art. The interpretation of such is much more interesting.

This paper focuses on the retelling of *The Mahabharata* in the work of the Indian writer-V. Raghunathan's *Duryodhana*. In addition, it also looks at how this novel functions as a counter-narrative and subverts the notion of retelling. Moreover it also spotlights on the purpose

and the relevance of studying mythological stories in the modern society and its use to us today. In the novel *Duryodhana*, V. Raghunathan focuses on the vanquished crown prince Duryodhana and portrayed him as a hero. The whole episode of *The Mahabharata* is seen from the perspective of Duryodhana who is portrayed as a negative character so far in the history of retelling of *The Mahabharata*. Through this novel, he breaks the tradition of master narrative or grand narrative. He also questions the conventional ideas formed by the early writers on the character of Duryodhana.

In the last few years, many writers retold *The Mahabharata* in order to pass its richness to the next generation. In the contemporary retellings, the story is seen in a manner that one has never thought of or known. Myths are no longer a story of Kings and Gods; the views have changed. Retellings carry forward the story beyond from a point where people know the plot.

Retelling can also be considered as a counter-narrative. The term counter-narrative was coined by Angel Crarcia Landa. According to Tisha Turk, counter-narrative takes a wide range of forms:

... an author may fill in the outlines of a tale with greater detail; move the story to different setting; tell it from a different point of view or focalize it through a different character; offer a new interpretation of a story in order to subvert it... or combine these approaches in various ways. (295)

The goal of the counter-narrative is to challenge the so-called 'universal truths' which is constructed by grand narratives or conventional narratives.

Counter-narratives strive to tell the story from the point of silenced characters. Secondly, counter-narratives challenge the binary oppositions created in the grand narratives. Thirdly, they try to establish an identity for the silenced characters. Moreover in literature myths and epics are told in the form of grand narratives in order to give a space for such interpretation.

Though from early writers till modern writers, myth is retold many times and many interpretations are given to it. Still the voice of the prime characters dominates the grand narration. One finds in the early retelling of the Mahabharata, the voice of the vanquished is marginalized but now the modern writers have brought them to the centre of focus. Vanquished characters are reviewed from new point of views which are not discussed in the past. One can see it as a resistance to the act of presentations of the marginalized in the grand narratives.

This paper views Duryodhana within a framework of counter-narrative which is employed as a 'resistance' to question the established versions of retelling. This novel gives importance to the historically silenced or suppressed character of Duryodhana. By focusing from the perspective of Duryodhana, this novel challenges the binary opposition created by the grand narrative. It also subverts the so-called 'universal truths' created by the grand or master narratives. *Duryodhana* is normally seen as the retelling of *The Mahabharata* from Duryodhana's perspective. But this novel can also be seen as a counter-narrative of the established narrative of *The Mahabharata*.

In this context, V. Raghunathan's *Duryodhana* retells *The Mahabharata* and also parodies the established versions of *The Mahabharata*. Since the time when *The Mahabharata* has been told people has unquestioningly seen Duryodhana as the man whose greed for power has brought him to the battle of Kurukshetra and has seen the whole episode from the Pandavas' point of view. But this novel resists the canonical and grand narrative by presenting the same episode from the loser side (Kauravas). It focuses on Duryodhana's voice over the Pandavas. In this novel, Duryodhana has presented himself as an advocate of the contemporary world and justifies his past actions against the Pandavas. It presents Duryodhana's narrative by finding similarities and contrasts among other established retellings of the *Mahabharata*.

V. Raghunathan is an adjunct professor at the University of Bocconi in Milan, Italy and Schulich School of Business, York University in Toronto, Canada. He is an academician, writer, translator, columnist and corporate executive. He has written for leading newspapers and magazines and blogs for the Times of India. His books include *Locks*, *Mahabharata and Mathematics*, *Ganesha on the Dashboard*, *Corruption Conundrum*, *Don't Spirit the Marathon* and *Games Indians Play*.

His latest novel *Duryodhana* is published in 2014. In this, V. Raghunathan, takes the side of Duryodhana to give an alternative perspective to the myth. It is the story of young Duryodhana who tells the story from his childhood till Draupadi's public disrobing. This novel is divided into four parts. First part deals with the childhood experience of Duryodhana with his ninety nine brothers and one sister in his Hastinapura palace. The second part discusses his childhood experiences with his cousins, Pandavas in the Drona's Kurukulam (school). The third part talks about his friendship with Karna and the caste issue. The last part deals with the dice

game between Pandavas and Kauravas and the traits of king. Though Mahabharata has many important characters like Lord Krishna, Bhishma, Draupadi, Arjuna, Balarama, and Sakunthala etc... he centers his story on the character of Duryodhana. Now, he (Duryodhana) has come to justify his actions which are interpreted unfairly by the early writers in the past.

Though narration of the story from Duryodhana's perspective is not a new style in the history of retelling, still this novel stands out as a unique among them. In the second century Bhasa has written the play *Urubhanga* from the view point of Duryodhana. Later in Tamil, S. Vijayakumar has written *Oru Vazhakku Duryodhanai Adharithu* (2012) from Duryodhana's perspective. But these two novels have presented Duryodhana not as a hero but only a tragic victim.

Recently Anand Neelakandan's novel, *Ajaya* discusses caste issues though it is from the view point of Duryodhana. It also gives more importance to Ekalaiyya's voice than Duryodhana. Though these novels are not presented Duryodhana as a hero, they are written in favour of Kauravas and pointed out that Duryodhana has fought only for what he has deserved.

Although Raghunathan's Duryodhana also talks about the same issue, he has made some transitions from the early retelling of the Mahabharata. He locates Duryodhana not in the past as early writers but in the present period as a modern man who tries to set his actions right. In the end of the prologue Duryodhana directly questions the audience and tells the purpose of this novel (retelling) as:

What am I going to tell you about myself that you do not already know? Why should you invest time in understanding the real me? Isn't the epic protracted enough without my adding to it further?

...My only response to these questions is to ask another question: Wouldn't you want to see the other part of the Mahabharata- Dr. Jekylls among the Kauravas and Mr. Hydes among the Pandavas? (20)

The author has presented Duryodhana as a man who turns back to see his life and justifies his actions and questions the writers who were all represented him as a grey character and villain in the retelling of *The Mahabharata*. He tells reasons for his actions and questions the writers who have all treated him unfairly in the retelling of *The Mahabharata*. The author justifies

Duryodhana's actions in the name of King's duty (Raja dharma) through the detailed internal monologue. The story is narrated in first person by Duryodhana himself.

The story begins with the prince Duryodhana who introduces his family history, ninety-nine brothers and one sister, and their abnormal conception. The novel, in brief, deals with the emotions and the childhood experiences of Duryodhana. It traces the life of Duryodhana right from his birth and how he has brought up with the desire of becoming a crown king, his friendship with Karna, his love for Draupadi, his marriage with Banumathi, his hatred towards the Pandavas and Kunti.

The prologue gives the detailed understanding of the history of Hastinapura and Kuru dynasty. In this section, Duryodhana questions the established versions of *The Mahabharata* in which he has portrayed as a cunning and devious man by his grandfather, sage Vyasa. Through Duryodhana, the author spotlights on the story which is told and retold many times from the Pandavas' perspective and how the Kauravas are coloured as evil in order to prove Pandavas are good. Besides Duryodhana thinks why the later writers are treated him unfairly like his grandfather. Whether is it because Vyasa has told the story as such? (1)

He explains his first encounter with the Pandavas and how Kunti has manipulated the power. He questions the lineage of Pandavas and dismisses that they do not have the rights to claim the throne which is meant to him. Their arrival becomes a threat for Duryodhana who is really a crown-prince of Hastinapura after his father. So he decides to eliminate the people who have been stand as a hindrance to achieve the throne.

The Second part moves with the plot of murder. Duryodhana has started to think the weakness of Arjuna and Bhima (the two pandavas). Then he discovers that Bhima's weakness is his gluttony. So he has attempted to murder Bhima by poisoning but he fails. Then he hatches the plan to murder all the Pandavas by firing their house which is made up of lac. But the Pandavas escape from the house through the tunnel and start to live in the forest in disguise. He talks about his friendship with Karna and tells how Karna is humiliated in the hands of Drona and Pandavas.

The last two parts explains the king's duty as the protagonist narrates the major turns of the epic that leads towards the beginning of the Kurukshetra war. This part is also set to correct the misrepresentation of the scene- disrobing Draupadi in public by providing different meaning to it.

This novel gives different meaning to the familiar episodes like Duryodhana's attempt to poison Bhima, burning of lac house, the game of dice or disrobing Draupadi in the public, and his love for Draupadi. V. Raghunathan comments that:

The popular telling of *The Mahabharata* are about Duryodhana's deviousness, obstinacy and greed for power that would bring about the battle of Kurushetra between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, and his own downfall. But was there more to him? Was he all black, or was it a matter of shades of grey? What was he? (308)

Duryodhana takes "naming" as an example to show how his reputation was damaged by earlier retellings. In modern society one can come across the people are being named as Arjuna and Krishna but never as Duryodhana. It is because of the retellings in which the story of the Pandavas has been exaggerated whereas the Kauravas have been suppressed and sniffed out. He wonders how "every little defect and mistake of the Kauravas was painted with tar and parallel accounts of the Pandavas white washed" in the history of retellings. (13)

He worries how the Pandavas have made it difficult for him to live in peace; at the same time the posterity has denied him peace ever even after his death. He further states:

We did our share of good deeds. We committed our share of mistakes. But we no worse, if no better, than the Pandavas. It is simply somewhere along the long road of mythological storytelling, someone decided to paint us a dark shade and then with every coat it just got darker and darker, as the stories were repeated again and again. (17)

Duryodhana is a rebellious man. His love for Draupadi is complex because it has interpreted differently in each version. He confronts that he has fallen in love with Draupadi or Panchali when he sees her painting. He has eagerly been waiting to get a single glimpse from her.

In the history of retelling of *The Mahabharata*, one of the famous events is Duryodhana's attempt to poison Bhima. It is one of the scenes that help the early writers to shape the character of Duryodhana as a villain. But Raghunathan inserts one more incident before this incident to subvert the earlier viewpoints.

Actually Raghunathan splits the poisoning episode in to two parts. In the first part, Bhima and Duryodhana are one team that is assigned to hunt the animals in the forest. When they both go for a hunt, they are disturbed by the pair of tigers during their mating. Duryodhana kills the tigress without knowing that there is another tiger near by it. He rushes towards Bhima to caution him but it was too late. Duryodhana has found the huge growling tiger and the fearless Bhima facing each other. The tiger is ready to bounce on Bhima. Duryodhana has helped Bhima by killing the tiger with his arrow. Here Duryodhana followed the dharma of hunting. Duryodhana gives a reason for saving Bhima's life though he has tried to take it in the second part:

I had put Bhima on the death row in my scheme of things, to safeguard my crown and kingdom, which I regarded as my rajadharma. Letting the tiger kill Bhima would have violated the dharma of the hunt as well as somehow contaminated the purity of my rajadharma. (123)

He justifies his action of killing Bhima in the name of rajadharma. He equates it with later event in which Bhima has killed Jarasandha in order to clear the hurdle for his elder brother Yudhisthira to become king. Here he questions why his action is considered as wrong and Bhima's action is right? Both have done it to save the kingdom and in the name of rajadharma but why Duryodhana alone is tagged as villain?

The second important event is the burning of the Lac or wax house in Varanavata. Later in the war Krishna gives sermon to Arjuna about one's dharma when both the armies of Kauravas and Kuntiputras (not Pandavas according to Duryodhana) are waited. "...it was perfectly all right to kill your family and friends, teachers, and well-wishers, young and old, in defence of your kingdom, which was integral to rajadharma" (107). "Even killing was not murder but a call of duty to protect his state against treason and sedition. In short, the rules of common men do not apply to kings and kingdoms" (192). Hence there is nothing wrong in eliminating Kunti and Kuntiputras when it compared to the war of Mahabharata or Kurukshetra.

Moreover "In statecraft, killing is neither unknown nor unusual. As a matter of fact, it is considered a good bargain if by assassinating an individual you can save a kingdom or avert a war or some other calamity"(112). So with the help of Prochana, a constructor Duryodhana brings out the plot of killing Kunti and Kuntiputras by sending them to spend a year in Varanavata palace. But they had learned the plot in advance and escaped through the tunnel

before the palace was caught fire. Before they left the palace they were letting the nishadha mother and her five grown up sons' burn in that palace. Here Duryodhana advocates for himself as, "Which is worse: the casual killing of six innocent souls who came to you for shelter, or the killing of six individuals who are threatening to divide your kingdom?" (215).

Last and very important scene that leads to Kurukshetra war is game of dice that conducted in Hastinapura palace. In those days game of dice is very famous and it is played to avoid political war between two kingdoms. The loser of the game should obey to the orders of the winner and lost objects belong to the winner. So, in order to avoid war between Hastinapura and Indraprastha, game of dice was conducted between Yudhisthira and Sakuni (Duryodhana's maternal uncle).

Shakuni is a king of Gandhar and younger brother of Duryodhana's mother who always rattling a pair of four-sided dice in his palms. He often took close decisions, even important ones like- whether or not to wage a war, whether or not to make a friend of a neighbouring kingdom, trust a particular courtier or not, and so forth by a throw of dice. Even in that process he has come to understand dice and cowries intimately and had grown into a master thrower of them. "Unfortunately, his reputation has been severely compromised for facilitating The Mahabharata war, and amply denigrated by posterity thanks to the customary bias of the storytelling intermediaries" says Duryodhana (249). It has been said that Shakuni has poisoned the mind of Duryodhana and has driven him to the war. This was clarified by Duryodhana in this novel, "He [Shakuni] wasn't my charioteer and so drove me nowhere. That's what Krishna did for Arjuna, literally and metaphorically" (249), but early writers have told this differently and also they defend Arjuna and Krishna in the name of Dharma.

Contrary to popular belief, Duryodhana comments that Shakuni was not a cheat but simply a master thrower of dice. In addition, Shakuni is well aware of the probability of outcome for a throw, even in a purely random throw of a single dice. Here the author subverts the binary opposition that is created in the grand narrative about the character of Shakuni.

On the other hand, Yudhisthira, a king of Indraprastha and elder one of the Pandavas is a very different person when he played game of chance or dice. Once Duryodhana notices how Yudhisthira would become extremely excitable in betting recklessly and make obvious errors in

moving his pieces. Duryodhana observes Yudhisthira's interest in these games and comments that:

If he was winning, he would want to continue playing so he could go on winning. If he was losing, he would want to keep playing to recoup his losses. He was intense in his attitude towards these games. But he was not too keen for his brothers to find out about these bets he placed with me. (61)

Yudhisthira's childhood attachment with staking and betting later reflects in the game of dice or Draupadi's public disrobing. Once, Yudhisthira has brought new set of mottled rare cowrie shells to play with Duryodhana. Some of cowries has dried mud inside which makes them heavier on the back. Therefore they fall belly-up more often as compared to clean cowries. Duryodhana has learnt it soon whereas Yudhisthira has never figured them out and also not assess the outcome when throwing them. Even he is emotionally attached himself while gambling. Besides he is failed to understand how to improve one's odds of winning and that planning and strategizing held a key role even in game of chance.

In the game of dice to win his kingdom back, Yudhisthira staked his four brothers, himself and then Draupadi or Panchali. Unfortunately he lost everything. For it Duryodhana comments that:

Lecturing on the dharma of a king, he [Yudhisthira] seemed innocent of the dharma of a husband and or a brother. He seemed equally innocent of the elementary rule that all rights have their corresponding duties. The rights of the monarch gain their legitimacy only by how well he carries out his duties towards his subjects. Staking one's kingdom in a game of chance is the same as a king looting his own kingdom, and it certainly is not one of the dharmas or rights of a monarch. (282)

The insult of Draupadi in the rajasuya is still lingered in his ears which have made him to insult Draupadi publicly. He wonders what has made him to behave cruelly towards Draupadi; whether is it because of wine or his suppressed desire on Draupadi. Though Yudhisthira has staked his possession, the history of retelling praised him. On the other hand Duryodhana who tried to safeguard his kingdom becomes seen as a villain and malignant. Duryodhana wonders:

Was it my fault that Yudhisthira chose to accept my invite? Was it my fault if he chose not to heed his brothers' advice against accepting the invitation? Was it my fault that Yudhisthira had a gambling addiction? Was it my fault if he was delusional about his prowess at chaupar? Was it my fault if he had a warped understanding of a king's rights- that he could wager his kingdom on the board? Was it my fault if he wagered his own brothers on the board? Was it my fault if Yudhisthira considered his wife to be his property and wagered her? Was it my fault if Shakuni was a better player of chaupar than Yudhisthira? (303)

After public disrobing scene, Duryodhana felt ashamed of being pitiless towards Draupadi. He regrets for his actions. On the other hand he also narrates the truth in his side which is misrepresented in the history of retelling. He gives different explanation for his actions. His explanation for disrobing Draupadi in public is contradicting to the interpretation given in the history of retelling. He also questions the conventional writers and readers:

Am I to be faulted for agreeing to give away Indraprastha to the Kuntiputras in the first place? Am I to be blamed for their conducting the rajasuya which also subjugated Hastinapura as their dominion? Am I to be faulted for winning back Indraprastha by strategic statecraft rather than open warfare with a state more powerful than mine? Am I to be faulted for having an unrequited crush on Panchali? Then why have I been so vilified while the Kuntipudras continue to shine blameless? (303-304)

Duryodhana's love for his wife Bhanumati is reflected later in the novel when he felt ashamed to stand in front of her. Even he has worried about how she would think of him after she has come to know what happened in the Palace of Hastinapura. He has worried because he loves his wife more than Draupadi who insulted him as a 'blind son of a blind king' in front of other kings and princes in the palace of Indraprastha. "I recalled every instance of Panchali spurning and mocking my silent love for her..." (290). Duryodhana states,

I don't care what anybody else thinks of me. I don't care what the entire posterity, with its gods and non-gods and hordes of humans, thinks of me. To me it is enough that Bhanumati did not think of me evil. In short, I did not mean any dishonour to Panchali. There was no vastraharan. There is only one truth: if

Panchali was dishonoured that fateful day, it was at the hands of Yudhisthira, not mine. (302)

The above statement suggests how Duryodhana has valued his relationship with Bhanumati more than his unrequited love for Draupadi. Duryodhana differentiates his love for Bhanumati and Draupadi by saying that:

I had been in love with Bhanu. But the love I had for her was never the same as what I had felt for Panchali. If my love for Bhanu was the stable of life to satiate the soul, my feelings for Panchali were like the sura that intoxicates the very consciousness. If Bhanu was a tenant who took residence in perfect harmony in my heart, Panchali had been the shadowy ghost who haunted that residence. If Bhanu was a good night's sleep, Panchali was insomnia. Bhanu was the wife; Panchali the unattained mistress. And now attainable! (285-86)

Though after the game of dice, Duryodhana has a second chance to marry Draupadi, he did not do that. Because, "Bhanumati had given me (Duryodhana) everything one could ever ask for in a wife-- unconditional love, profuse care, immense concern, incredible loyalty, deep friendship,..” (284).

Moreover it is something different when it comes to narration. The author consciously places the ideas side by side. In many places, the author consciously voices over the conventional concept of retelling through the character of Duryodhana. In one place he says, "And now, after so many millennia, as I try to recount my tale, I am afraid the version I have is not necessarily crisp and in perfect chronological order as it should be in a good soap opera.” (75)

Towards the ending of the novel, Duryodhana defends himself by highlighting the nature of Pandavas' origin. He also questions his father about the rights that the pandavas having in the kingdom of Hastinapura as:

Father, you refer to Yudhisthira as Panduputra. You also refer to the five brothers as my cousins, when you know well that not a single one of those five is a Panduputra, though Kuntiputras and Madriputras they may be... or are you innocent of the knowledge that the fathers of the five brothers are certainly not my uncles? Not one of them. Is Yama your brother? Or Vayu? Or Indra? Or the

Ashwini Kumaras? Surely you are aware that your half-brother could never beget offspring? So how are they Panduputras or my cousins? And what right does the eldest of such a bunch have upon the throne of Hastinapura? (84)

Next, an open ending of the novel leaves the gap to interpret the novel in many dimensions. The novel ends abruptly to attract the modern readers' attention towards The Mahabharata and also to create the interest in the readers to provide wide range of interpretations. Apart from Duryodhana, the role of the reader plays a main part in the novel. In the ending of the novel, Duryodhana left everything in the hands of reader to decide or interpret his story. He states that:

I may have been greedy for not letting go of even a fraction of my kingdom. But I had done it one and realized the greed of the pretenders to the throne at my cost. I may be called evil for the many plots that I devised in the course of protecting my kingdom. But weren't the Kuntiputras equally evil in their own plots in trying to wrest away what was legitimately mine? Well, I have no regrets about what or who I was. (307)

To conclude, this paper has viewed the effect of the counter-narrative in the novel *Duryodhana*. Placing Duryodhana in a modern context makes the plot interesting as well as makes the readers to offer many interpretations. Further this paper re-emphasizes how Duryodhana denies the grand narrative and authoritative narrative of early retellings.

By focusing on V. Raghunathan's *Duryodhana* as a counter-narrative this paper brings out the new perspective to the terms 'retelling' and 'myth.' 'Retelling' is not merely narrating the story as it is but experimenting with the conventional story and present it beyond one has to think and known. Similarly 'myth' is not seen as fictional or invented story but 'primitive story.' The above mentioned novel studied through the frameworks- counter-narrative, resistance of the marginalized or unnoticed and subversion.

*Duryodhana* brings out the new meaning or dimension to the famous episodes of *The Mahabharata* which is not discussed earlier. This novel focuses on the perspective of the vanquished crown king- Duryodhana from the positive angle. Even his voice and perspective have not been taken into consideration by the early writers. But V. Raghunathan gives voice to Duryodhana's perspective in his novel and counter narrates the established ideas created by the

grand narrative. In this context, this paper views the novel- *Duryodhana* within the framework of counter-narrative and also sees this novel as an appropriate example for a modern way of retelling. By justifying Duryodhana's actions and highlighting the negative aspects of the Pandavas, Raghunathan opposes the grand narrative or conventional narrative.

In addition, this paper states the scope for further research in this field. Further, researchers may concentrate on the aspect of counter-narrative in the form of retellings done by a few writers like Ashwin Sanghi's *The Krishna Key*, Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*, Kavita Kane's *Sita's Sister*, Christopher C. Doyle's *The Mahabharata Secret and The Mahabharata and the Quest*, Amish Tirpathi's *The Immortals of Meluha*, *The Secret of The Nagas* and *The Oath of Vayuputras*.

Moreover, the future researcher can also focus on the questions- why modern writers concentrate more on the mythological stories? What is the purpose of retelling those so called 'outdated' stories?

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