



## Reconstruction of narratives of the *Mahabharata* in Samaresh Basu's novels "Yud'dhēra Śēṣa Sēnāpāti" and "Pṛithā"

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(Received: 10-12-2021; Accepted: 06-07-2022; Published: 07-08-2022)

### Abstract

The trend of writing Bengali mythological novels inspired from the Ramayana, the Mahabharata and the Puranas started almost hundred years after the beginning of Bengali novel writing. These novels attracted the readers due to their novelty. Samaresh Basu, famously known as Kalkut, made a special place in the genre of writing mythological novels through some of his literary works. In his celebrated novels *Yud'dhēra Śēṣa Sēnāpāti* (1984) and *Pṛithā* (1986), he analyses the narratives and characters of the Mahabharata from the point of view of the modern rationalist. Through *Yud'dhēra Śēṣa Sēnāpāti*, Kalkut has highlighted the battle of Mahabharata as a war of iniquity. He has tried to depict its narratives in a fresh way by portraying Aswathama, the deprived and infamous character of the Mahabharata, giving him the status of the last commander of the Mahabharata war. Besides, in his novel *Pṛithā*, he has presented the character of Kunti in a new form while rearranging the story of Mahabharata. Analysing some of the Mahabharata's events associated with Kunti through eyes of the modern rationalist, he has presented the Mahabharata story in a newborn form to the readers. In this paper, we shall look into how the stories of Mahabharata in these two novels were retold by Samaresh Basu while absorbing the literary components of the epic and reconstructing them afresh through weaving various subtle and intricate feelings, and distinctive expressions into the texture of the past while dealing with the theme of life.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata; Samaresh Basu; Reconstruction; War; Injustice

### 1. Introduction

The relationship between literature and human life is very close. In literature, the story of life takes shape in a special way. It is not an exaggeration to say that among the various categories of literature, human life and the glory of life have become the most embodied in the novel. According to critics,

“বিশ্বজগতের সীমাহীন বিচিত্র জীবনলিলা, মানবজীবনের বহুমুখী গতি-প্রকৃতির যথাসম্ভব সমগ্র ও শিল্পসন্মত রূপ চিত্রিত করাই উপন্যাসের লক্ষ্য।” (Chattopadhyay, 1995; pp. 240)

(The aim of the novel is to depict as complete and artistic a form as possible of the infinitely diverse life of the universe and the multi-faceted nature of human life.)

The novelist uses the story or story as a means of expressing the artistic form of this diverse life and the multifaceted movement of human life. That is why novels are referred to as fiction. Just as the modern society and the life story of its people is shaped in a novel, in a similar way, the Ramayana and the Mahabharata were written in the context of the social life of that time. In words of the critics,

“পুরাণের পাত্র-পাত্রিরা অবশ্যই তৎকালে রক্ত মাংসের মানুষ ছিল। তাদের নিয়ে উদ্দেশ্যমূলক পদ্ধতিতে জীবনের বিবিধ ঘটনার মালা গেথেছেন পুরাণকাররা।” (Sengupta *et al.*, 2008; pp. 305)

(The protagonists of the Puranas must have been people of blood and flesh at that time. These mythical authors have made a wreath of various events of life

by means of the protagonists in a purposeful way.)

Bengali novels based on Ramayana, Mahabharata and the Puranas began in the second half of the twentieth century. At this time, character-centeredness was especially prominent in Bengali novels, but the writers of mythological novels gave equal importance to the character as well as the narratives in their novels. Because the narratives of Mahabharata imbued “jiban rasa” (essence of life), this attracted the novelists who went to pages of the epic in search of the source for their stories (Das, 2015). Immersing stories of the miracles of gods, demons and superhumans of the Mahabharata amidst the narratives of modern-day life, the novelists brought to the readers a new perception of mythology. And for this reason, in most novels based on the Ramayana and Mahabharata, a reconstruction of mythological events can be seen. Notable novels in this regard are Śrīkṛṣṇa Bāsudēba by Barindranath Das, Jatugṛha of Chitta Singha, Pūrṇābatāra of Pramathanath Bishi, Śāmba of Kalkut, Yud'dhēra Śēṣa Sēnāpāti, Pritha, Antima Praṇaya, Cīrasimantini of Jagendra Kumar Mitra, etc.

Samaresh Basu, famously known by the name ‘Kalkut’ is one of the prominent authors of mythological novels in Bengali literature. From earlier times, he was attracted by the ancient stories of Ramayana, and the period of Mahabharata. It can be said that the wandering mind of Kalkut travelled on the path of the fallen leaves of the past, which led him to write five novels, each shaped on the Ramayana and the Mahabharata. Kalkut presents the characters of his novel with modern logic free of religious reform. In this regard, critics have rightly said,

“কালকূট’ সমরেশের এই পুরাণ চর্চার অন্যতম বিশিষ্ট হল যে, পুরাণনির্ভর তার সমস্ত কাহিনিগুলিই কিন্তু ধর্মসংস্কার রহিত বস্তুত সবগুলিতেই প্রাচীন কাহিনির কাঠামোর ওপর আধুনিক মানুষের দৃষ্টিভঙ্গী আরপিত করে তিনি সাজিয়েছেন, তাকে এক ধরণের পুনর্নির্মাণ হয়তো বলা যেতে পারে।” (Sengupta, 2015; pp. 191)

(One of the highlights of this Purana practice of ‘Kalkut’ Samaresh is that all his stories based on the Puranas are devoid of religious reform. In fact, in all of his mythological works, what he has depicted by cultivating the perspective of the modern individual on the framework of the ancient narrative may be called a kind of reconstruction.)

In this paper, we shall look into how the stories of Mahabharata in these two novels were retold by Samaresh Basu while absorbing the literary components of the epic and reconstructing them afresh through weaving various subtle and intricate feelings, and

distinctive expressions into the texture of the past while dealing with the theme of life.

## 2. Reconstructive approach in ‘Yud'dhēra Śēṣa Sēnāpāti’

In the context of the political turmoil of the Kauravas and Pandavas, one of the novels based on the Mahabharata is Kalkut’s “Yud'dhera Sesa Senāpāti”. This was his first mythological novel wherein he focussed on the narrative of the infamous Samba. In this novel, the author focuses on Dronacharya’s son Aswathama, who is present in the story of the Mahabharata in a small scale. Aswathama is depicted by the author as the last Sarbadhinayaka (commander) of the Mahabharata war. Before entering into the main story of the novel, the author has given a new interpretation of some events in the Mahabharata to give rationality to the story. In critics’ words,

“কাহিনি ও আলোচনা এই দুটি দিক নিয়েই যেহেতু কালকূটের এই উপন্যাসটি গড়ে উঠেছে সেই জন্য এই নতুন বাখ্যাগুলিকে উপেক্ষা করে কাহিনির ভাবকেন্দ্রে পৌঁছানো যায়না।” (Sengupta, 2015; pp. 192)

(Since this novel of Kalkut is built on both the aspects of the story and its discussion, it is not possible to reach the centre of thought of the story by ignoring these new explanations.)

Kalkut accepts the Mahabharata as a historical book, believing that many untold truths have been covered within the epic. Therefore, he has discovered a new form of the narrative by removing the coating of untruth on the mythological stories with respect to the point of view of the historian. This can also be comprehended in this novel. Kalkut has brought out the real truth by breaking through the layers of subtle complexity of Kuruvansh and the politics in the kingdom of Hastinapur. In this novel, the author has also tried to discover the real mystery of the Battle of Kurukshetra. In the Mahabharata, the author has witnessed the war of Adharma (unrighteousness) in the name of Dharma. Hindu civilization in India was supposed to flourish through the assimilation of the Aryans and non-Aryans. And in the beginning of this, Ramayana and later Mahabharata were written. According to the author, between the two epics, the activities of the Aryan and non-Aryan association can be seen. Later it was witnessed that the Aryans finally bowed down to the non-Aryans, as a prime example of which the author mentions the Mahabharata. The author believes that the main reason for the battle of Kurukshetra is the conflict of two brothers Bhishma and Vyasadeva. Secondly, the author finds Krishna

culpable for the battle.

As a third reason, the author points to the enmity between Drona and Dhrupada. Although the Battle of Kurukshetra was described as a religious battle in Mahabharata, the author did not want to accept it. He said,

“ধর্মযুদ্ধ এই নয়, যে ধর্মীও অনুষ্ঠানের দ্বারা যুদ্ধ। ধর্মযুদ্ধ ন্যায়-যুদ্ধ, নিয়ম মেনে চলা। নীতি বিরুদ্ধ যুদ্ধ নয়। কিন্তু কুরুক্ষেত্র পুণ্য স্থানে আমি দেখেছি, সেখানে ধর্মযুদ্ধ হয়নি। কৌরব পাণ্ডব উভয় পক্ষই আনেক অন্যায় করেছেন।” (Basu, 2009; pp. 2921)

(A righteous war is not a war fought by religious means. A righteous war is fought for justice, obeying the rules. It is not a war fought against policy. But I have seen at the sacred land of Kurukshetra, there was no righteous war fought there. Kaurava-Pandavas have done a lot of injustice on both sides.)

The author says that Bhima unjustly defeated Duryodhana in the battle of Kurukshetra. Bhima broke the policy of war by hitting Duryodhana on the head in the fallen state. In the Mahabharata, Sanjaya says in this context,

“পাপাত্মা বৃকোদর অধর্ম-যুদ্ধে জয়লাভ করিয়া যেমন হৃষ্ট ও সন্তুষ্ট হইয়াছে, আর কোন ব্যক্তি এই প্রকার কার্য করিয়া এমন আনন্দিত হয়না।” (Singha, 2005; pp. 527)

(No one is as happy and pleased to have won the war of immorality as the vicious Brikodara, and no one shall be this happy to do such a thing.)

In this way, the author analyses some of the contexts of the Mahabharata in the light of modern logic and forms the basis for entering his main story.

The author has taken the story of the novel from the Mahabharata and although there is no change in the story of Mahabharata in the novel, the novelty of the Mahabharata story can be seen its story wherein the Battle of Kurukshetra is portrayed as an unjust war through the modern logic of the author and giving glory to Aswathama as its hero.

Kalkut perceives Duryodhana's suspicions about the identity of the Pandavas to be behind the battle of Kurukshetra. Duryodhana could never accept the Pandavas as his brothers. The author does not consider his doubts to be unreasonable. Kalkut portrayed that when Duryodhana was hiding in Dwaipayana lake, Yudhishtira was keener among the Pandavas to find him. And the reason behind this, according to Kalkut, was Yudhishtira's greed for the crown. Such a desire of Yudhishtira to sit on the throne, is not mentioned in the pages of the Mahabharata. The author denies the number of soldiers and the number of deaths in the Battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata. According

to the author,

“বলা হচ্ছে যুদ্ধে সকল সৈন্যই নিহত হয়েছিল। এটা বাড়াবাড়ি রকমের সংখ্যা।... কৌরব পক্ষের সব সৈন্য মরেনি” (Basu, 2009; pp. 2932)

(It is said that all the soldiers were killed in the battle. It is an exaggerated number. ... Not all the soldiers of the Kaurava side died.)

The author did not want to accept this number stated in the original text from the point of view of modern logic.

The author of Mahabharata has represented the assassination of Abhimanyu to be unjust. But Kalkut tries to argue in the story of his novel that there was not so much injustice done. He showed that none of those who were making the maze killed Abhimanyu. They just encouraged Jayadratha to kill Abhimanyu. The author has thus infused innovation in this story of Abhimanyu's assassination.

The battle of Kurukshetra in the Mahabharata has been in the minds of the readers for ages as a religious war, but in this novel, the author also argues that this war is an unjust war through the characters of Aswathama, Balarama, and Duryodhana. In the original Mahabharata, the story of Panchala's murder by Aswathama is also shown to be hellish, but Kalkut shows this incident as a son's revenge for the killing of his father. In this way, Kalkut has brought innovation to the story of Mahabharata through various incidents.

### 3. Prithā and the reconstruction of the Mahabharata

Prithā is another novel based on the Mahabharata written by Kalkut. Keeping Kunti at the centre of the story in the social background of the time of Mahabharata, Kalkut has made a beautiful expression of women's chastity, the personal and conjugal relationship of men and women in this novel. Kalkut beheld Prithā with a rational point of view, removing devotional emotions. As a result of this vision of the author, in this novel, we witness a new form of the Mahabharata narrative. According to the author, Kunti's real identity has been covered with imaginary, miraculous coverings on her real being (Das, 2015). In this novel, he has opened the cover of imaginary miracles from Kunti's life and presented it in a new form. And in this context, there is innovation in the story of the novel.

In this novel, the author rejects the Mahabharata story about the mystery of the birth of Kunti's four sons and introduces a new idea. With the help of modern rational vision, Kalkut has tried to establish the consequences of the physical needs of men and women

through Prithâ and Durvasa. In this context, he denies the birth of her four sons in conjugation with the gods in the Mahabharata. In this context, the author said,

“নরনারীর দৈহিক মিলন ব্যতীত লোক সৃষ্টি একটি অসম্ভব বিষয়।” (Basu, 2012; pp. 44)

(It is impossible to create people without the physical union of the man and the woman.)

In the novel, the author says something new about Durvasa's arrival in Kunti's house. According to the author, Durvasa came to their house to get the services of Kunti, and that Durvasa had already decided to establish a relationship with Kunti. It is notable that Durvasa's intentions are not mentioned in the Mahabharata, it is the author's own opinion (Bhaduri, 2013). In the story of Mahabharata, the author has called the mantra of Kunti from Durvasa and the call to the sun with that mantra as well as the “Garbhadan” by the sun as a lie. In the birth of Karna, the author has tried to establish the causal relationship of the physical desires of men and women. The author of the Mahabharata does not show the so-called sun as Karna's father but shows Durvasa as Karna's father. With this story, Kalkut has cracked the wall of our mythological beliefs. After the birth of Karna, the author has moved away from the story of the Mahabharata of Karna where he is thrown into the Ashmati river, and is later brought up by of Karna by Adhiratha and Radha, and on the contrary, presents a new story in front of us. According to the author, Kunti himself sent Karna in a wooden boat to Radha and Adhiratha. Such an anecdote is not mentioned in the narrative of Mahabharata. Besides, the author sees sage Kimddak's deer in a different way. According to

him, Kimddak may have had intercourse with a deer. Moreover, in this novel, the author shows Pandu as a seriously-disabled person. He also shows that Yudhishtira was not the son of a god, but it was Kunti's call to Vidur and her physical union with him, which is the result of the birth of the first Pandava. In this way, the author has presented an entirely new form of the Mahabharata story before the readers through various episodes derived from the epic.

#### 4. Conclusion

The trend of rationalism that started among the Bengali mythological novelists was successfully taken forward by ‘Kalkut’ Samaresh Basu in his works. The religious thoughts and philosophies that were mostly reflected by ancient mythological novels of the time were given a new perspective replete with logic and rationalism in Kalkut's novels. With great courage, he analysed the epical texts and its characters, and retold them with novelty. In this way, the narratives of Mahabharata were given a fresh and modern form by Basu. He denied certain incidents of the epic with adroit logic in most of his works. In his novel titled “Prithâ”, Kalkut ventures a fresh approach to the plot by discarding the conventional mythical text in detecting the mystery of the four sons born of Kunti not by her husband, but by gods with the consent of her husband. Also, in the novel titled “Yud'dhêra Śêsa Sênâpâti ”, he endeavors to discover the narrative of the Mahabharata afresh in the backdrop of the conflict and union of the Aryans and non-Aryans. Through the process of construction and deconstruction, the representation of the mythical protagonists and narratives added a novel dimension to the genre of Bengali novels by its innovative style and form.

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