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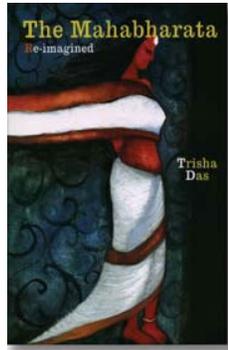
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Many Mahabharatas

The Mahabharata Re-imagined: A Collection of Scenes from the Epic

By Trisha Das

Rupa & Co, New Delhi, 2009, 115 pp., Rs 95

ISBN 9788129114464

The Pregnant King

By Devdutt Pattanaik

Penguin Books India, New Delhi, 2008, 349 pp., Rs 295

ISBN 9780143063476

SAMHITA ARNI

Don't judge a book by its cover' was the all-too-frequent refrain of my childhood. But having thoroughly scoured the contents of the two books that lie before me, I'm confronted by the opposite circumstance. Both books deal with the *Mahabharata*. But here the similarity ends.

The cover of Trisha Das' book *The Mahabharata Re-Imagined* features a woman, painted in a Gauguin-esque style. She is dark, dressed in a white sari. Her unbound hair flows freely. Her eyes rest on the ground before her. Unless I'm much mistaken, this is Draupadi, "imagined" at her disrobing—this is a woman's (possibly a feminist's) imagining of the *Mahabharata*. Which begs the question: is this truly a "re-imagining" of the *Mahabharata*? The title suggests that this is a novel perspective, but the contents and the unoriginal cover design lead me to differ. None of it is really new. Das takes a stab at a feminist reading in a few stories that involve characters like Kunti, Draupadi and Amba, but does nothing to break new ground. I've read more detailed and intriguing explorations of the same characters in other works, most notably in Iravati Karve's path-breaking *Yuganta* (Orient Longman, 1991).

The writing too, isn't anything spectacular. To be fair, it's quick and pacy, rich in textures and images. But on the very first page, as Draupadi prepares for her *svayamvara*, I run smack into a baffling sentence: "Today fear foiled the usual pride and courage in those flashes of black, bright like a gypsy fire in the desert out of a body almost buried in adornment." I'm stumped. What is a gypsy fire? But it doesn't end there—Das is deplorably fond of adjectives: "The front of the Palace of Illusions was towering, arching, undulating white stone." Her writing feels like the literary equivalent of a Balaji Telefilms serial, where excess and melodrama is the rule, not the exception. All that's missing from Das' book is the sound of cymbals clashing. Meanings are obvious, characters are over-acted (in this case over-written). Such is her Duryodhana:

Duryodhana swung around, eyes wide, his bulky chest heaving, his hairs on end like a wild hound. His voice was loud, confrontational. "Afraid? I am a warrior, afraid of no one. What is it you suggest? Tell me now!" He put his fists on hips and stood legs apart, facing his uncle. It was a dramatic stance, designed to intimidate.

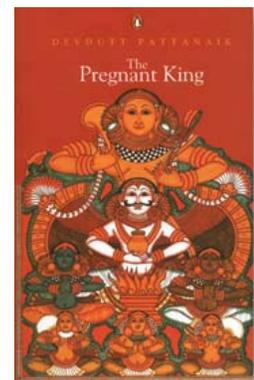
All of her characters lack the subtle and nuanced approach of the original *Mahabharata*. It's hard for me to like any of her characters—and as a result her writing is hard to digest. Bhishma and Kunti are blinkered individuals, trapped by their decisions, possessed by short, furious passions. The order of the stories works against the characters—first, we meet a hard-hearted, self-obsessed Kunti at Draupadi's *svayamvara*. Later, we encounter Kunti at the moment when she is forced to abandon her first-born, illegitimate son. Das describes a scene that explains, in part, Kunti's callous character. But it comes too late—already, my heart has been hardened against her.

There are occasional moments of insight. As Bhishma converses with Arjuna, moments before his death, he says: "I take solace in the fact that Krishna has been there for you in my absence. He has broken all the rules of Dharma in his short life, yet only good has come of it." This is an interesting comparison between Bhishma and Krishna—one that critiques the conventional definition of Dharma, and begins to engage with the essence of the epic. Yet, Das fails to push the envelope. For she still sees it as a war that is fought for the greater good, and her characters are not coloured by the rich ambiguities that make the original epic so vivid.

The Pregnant King succeeds where *The Mahabharata Re-imagined* fails. On the cover is the image of King Yuvavansha's *yagna*, the sacrifice that leads to his pregnancy. It's a beautiful painting, rich and exquisite—much like the novel itself.

Devdutt Pattanaik, in this compelling novel of ideas, deals with the thorny questions that lie at the heart of the *Mahabharata*. In the very first chapter, King Yuvavansha, the protagonist of Pattanaik's novel, explains why he wishes to fight at Kurukshetra:

"...to define Dharma for generations to come is why I wish to go. Long have we argued: who should be king? Kauravas or Pandavas? The sons of a blind elder brother or an impotent



younger brother? Men who go back on their word, or men who gamble away their kingdom? Men for whom Kingship is about inheritance, or men for whom kingship is about order?"

This is the conundrum at the heart of the *Mahabharata*, something many contemporary re-tellings whitewash and gloss over. It's exhilarating to finally read a novel where these questions are blatantly stated. Pattanaik's novel is the story of King Yuvavansha, the king who doesn't go to war, but who remains in his kingdom, unable to sire a son by any of his three wives. Finally, after a long sacrifice, he obtains a potion to impregnate his wives but, mistakenly, drinks it himself. He gives birth to a son, Mandhata, and later fathers another son by the second of his three queens. The story of Yuvavansha, the pregnant king, is recounted briefly in the *Mahabharata*, but Pattanaik takes him further and develops him into a believable character, plagued by a crisis of identity. The questions that he must confront threaten to destroy him and his family and challenge the established order of things. Still, he is forced to ask: Who is he? Is he a father or a mother? How can he be both? How can a king be a mother?

Pattanaik skilfully sustains the theme of multiple, conflicting identities throughout the novel. Using language

sparingly, Pattanaik creates complex, layered scenes that resonate with multiple meanings, as in this description of Yuvavansha's first wedding night: "She spread herself like the Earth and welcomed him as if he was the rain."

Meanwhile his domineering mother, Queen Shilavati sits alone: "remembering her own wedding night, this was the moment when the doorway opened between the land of the living and the land of the dead. If all went well, an ancestor would find his way into earth and the dreams would stop. And so would her rule."

The ancient symbolism of the divine union of Heaven and Earth, Prajapati and his daughter is echoed in these lines, but situated in the context of the personal lives of Yuvanashva, his bride and Shilavati. Boundaries shift on this night: the dead wait to be reborn, and an ambitious queen faces the end of her rule. Two meanings exist: one eternal and universal, the other specific and personal.

Men become women, women become men and some occupy the space in between. Even though Yuvanashva doesn't go to fight at Kurukshetra, he lives in a world changed by the war, and must engage with the dilemmas that the war brings. Pattanaik enlarges the scope of his novel by invoking the transgendered figures of Arjuna-Brihannala, Iravan, Bhangashvana and Shikhandi, evidencing that the 'middle space' is very much part of our myths. There are many who might find the ideas of this book uncomfortable, even controversial. But these myths still live and honour those who occupy the space between binaries. In Tamil Nadu eunuchs continue to ritually re-enact the wedding of Arjuna's son Iravan to Krishna (in the form of Mohini), and then mourn his death. In another festival men and

eunuchs dress as women and walk over fire to honour the fire-born Draupadi.

In recent times, entire shelves of bookshops have been taken over by books based on the epics. Puffin, on the heels of Anita Nair's book on Indian myths, has brought out *The Puffin Mahabharata* by Namita Gokhale. With a surfeit of adaptations and retellings, running the entire gamut of genres from graphic novels (Amruta Patil's much awaited *Parva*), to literary fiction (*The*

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Perhaps in the pages of the Mahabharata we find the complexities and ambiguities that continue to haunt us. The Mahabharata is more than a text. It's a corpus and a tradition that embraces a wide range of conflicting meanings, paradoxes and interpretations, where every one can find something that relates to their life

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Pregnant King and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *Palace of Illusions*, Picador, 2008) to thrillers (Ramesh Menon's *The Hunt for K*, Rupa, 2003), the question must be asked: is there a particular reason for the popularity of such stories?

Perhaps, as the sceptics say, publishing houses cater to a growing Indian market by producing "safe" books—on subjects that will have a wide readership in India, like the epics. Or,

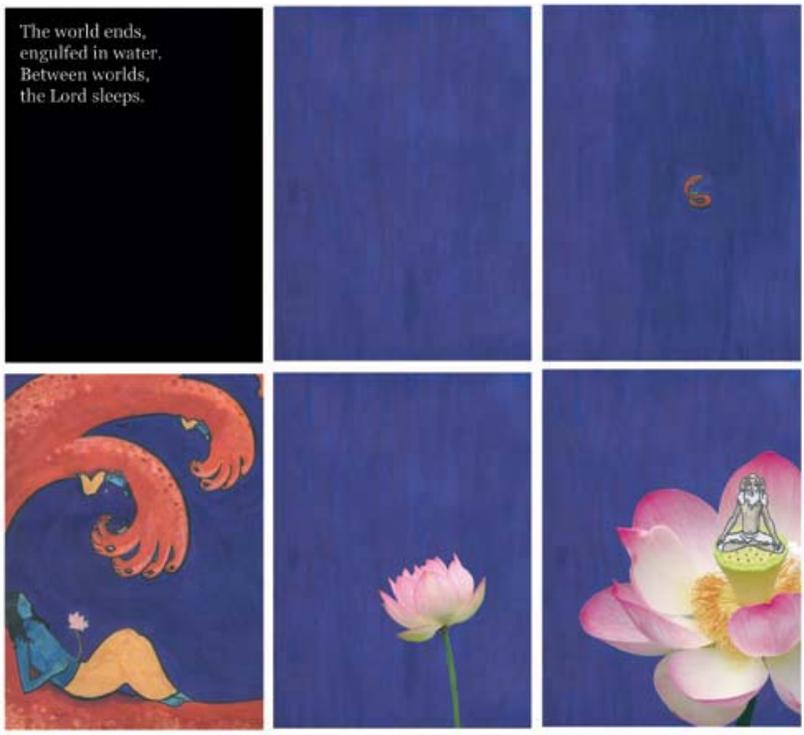
perhaps in the pages of the *Mahabharata* we find the complexities and ambiguities that continue to haunt us. The *Mahabharata* is more than a text. It's a corpus and a tradition that embraces a wide range of conflicting meanings, paradoxes and interpretations, where every one can find something that relates to their life. Perhaps, in Pattanaik's paradox of the 'Pregnant' King—the man who is both king and mother, mother and father—we find a mirror to the anxieties and schisms of our own times. In a recent article, novelist Zadie Smith notes:

How persistent this horror of the middling spot is, this dread of the interim place! It extends through the spectre of the transsexual, to the plight of the transsexual, to our present anxiety—disguised as genteel concern—for the contemporary immigrant, tragically split, we are sure, between worlds, ideas, cultures, voices—whatever will become of them? [...] One voice must be sacrificed for the other. What is double must be made singular.

(<http://www.nybooks.com/articles/22334>)

It's the same horror and dread that Yuvanashva experiences at the thought of blurred boundaries and double identities. But his world, like our world, cries out for an understanding that goes beyond singular 'social' truths; that acknowledges the existence of multiple truths and the permeability of boundaries.

At a time when Hinduism is being moulded by conservative politics Pattanaik's brilliant exploration of the space and tension between binaries of male and female, social and ascetic, reminds us that inclusive plurality is a strong, necessary part of the Hindu tradition. ■



From the *Adi Parva, Parva/The Epic* (work in progress) ©Amruta Patil

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