
Devdutt Pattanaik's *The Pregnant King* as A Postmodern Mini Narrative

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Abstract: *The Pregnant King*, written by Devdutt Pattanaik in 2008, is a novel that is lauded for its unique narration and plot. There are many elements in the novel with regards to narrative style that can be analysed to arrive at a closer meaning of the text. This research work will explore Devdutt's novel as a postmodern mini-narrative. *The Pregnant King* is based on *The Mahabharata* and has traditional tropes and elements, but the novel takes a unique approach to these elements. This research will show how this approach makes the novel a mini narrative. This article will discuss how the gender-based and societal binary oppositions within the text mark the move away from metanarratives that rely on such binaries to provide meaning. It will also discuss the inherent intertextuality and hyperreality as an important feature that juxtaposes grand themes and character arcs with more ordinary, unheroic ones. The paper will attempt to analyse the novel as a postmodern mini narrative by using the concepts of Lyotard and Baudrillard.

Keywords: Postmodernism, metanarrative, grand narrative, mini narrative, binary opposition, binaries, intertextuality, hyperreality, gender, postmodernity, femininity, masculinity

The 2008 novel, *The Pregnant King* revolves around king Yuvanashva. A reference to this tale is found in *The Mahabharata*. It is this tale that Pattanaik has expanded upon. The novel is set against the backdrop of *The Mahabharata* and makes mention of many incidents and events from the epic. But it focuses on Yuvanashva, the rightful king of Vallabhi, who is unable to ascend the throne as he cannot father children. When he decides to conduct a ritual to help his wives conceive children, he accidentally drinks the potion meant for his wives and becomes pregnant himself. This is the main narrative found in the text along with many other narratives.

The text purposefully turns away from the major events and character arcs found in the metanarrative, *The Mahabharata* and focuses on the king of this relatively minor country instead. The themes, the narrative style and the structure of the novel subverts expectations by taking familiar themes and elements and revisiting them through contemporary lenses.

Jean Francoise Lyotard focuses on narratives in his *The Postmodern Condition*. Lyotard discusses the move towards postmodernity and the postmodern condition as a result of a paradigm-shift that invalidates the precepts

upheld by metanarratives. In other words, this shift is a result of metanarratives losing their power and stability. "This leads to Lyotards's most often cited argument: 'I define *postmodern* as incredulity towards metanarratives'" (Malpas 36). This incredulity is displayed in *The Pregnant King* when the author turns away from the grand and heroic events that inspired *The Mahabharata* to focus on this lesser-known tale from the epic.

Grand narratives or metanarratives are overarching ideas that claim to offer truth, because of which, these narratives often portray the truth as something universal but immutable. In this sense, there can be one truth or one overall message. As *The Pregnant King* is based on *The Mahabharata*, it obviously relies on a metanarrative. *The Mahabharata* is centred around religion which is the basis of most metanarratives and tries to present a message throughout. This message is considered as the truth, the only truth. It operates on the basis of binaries such as the concept of good and evil, gender, truth and untruth. It also offers a consolidated theory of the great questions of life such as what it means to be human or the meaning of life. Its philosophies have formed the basis of culture and ways of life in mainland India. It has also affected the collective consciousness of people, offering them unifying ideas on life, death, the afterlife, gender, *dharmā*, *adharma* and so on. In this way, *The Mahabharata* has become the grand narrative of the East or at least a part of the East like Christianity

was the grand narrative of the West before the 20th century.

Pattanaik has moved away from the general to focus on the specific in this novel and used a polyphonic narrative style instead of one that centres on a select few.

With the advent of postmodernism, grand narratives have since been debunked or dismissed and made to give way to various mini narratives that discuss the multiplicity of truth or the danger of rigid binaries. In Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, the idea of salvation which is at the core of Christianity is dismissed. Salvation never arrives, or Godot never arrives. The play has taken a seminal concept and applied postmodern ideas in order to mutate it. In a similar manner, seminal concepts found in *The Mahabharata* have been changed or modified in Pattanaik's text to the extent that the text itself becomes a postmodern mini narrative. It is this concept that will be expounded upon in this research paper.

Gender is an important theme in the text. It is very important because it shows how this theme is treated differently in metanarratives and mini narratives.

In the novel, there are two characters that best portray this theme. Sumedha and Somvat are two young orphans who belong to the priestly Brahminical class. But since they do not have financial resources, they are unable to marry. As they are not able to marry, they are not allowed to conduct rituals or in other words, earn a living. It is at this time that the King conducts a Yagna in order to please the gods. As part of the Yagna, he

gives cows to newly wedded Brahmin couples. The young boys see this as an opportunity and decide to pose as husband and wife to receive the gift. However, they are not successful in perpetrating the ruse and they are discovered. In a bizarre but interesting turn of events, Somvat becomes Somvati. Though he biologically transforms into a woman, his reasons for doing so are not very clear. Initially, he turns down the opportunity to become a woman stating certain reasons.

Somvat imagined himself being dragged outside the city, near the cremation ground, being shoved against the chopping block. The smell of blood of previous offenders permeating through the rotting wood. The swoosh of the axe. The crack of the spine. Blood pouring out of his tongue. Dead eyes wide open. 'I don't know what is worse: dying as a man or living as a woman?' His feet were cold, his palms sweaty. (Pattanaik, 92)

But later on, Somvat decides to live as a woman, even when forbidden to do so. He embraces his femininity and decides to become Sumedha's wife. He is executed by the king for this and becomes a commentary on the inflexible gender roles forced upon people by society. The concept of gender as something immutable is criticised here, with the author foregrounding ideas of gender-fluidity and performativity. But the treatment of gender differs significantly in this novel as opposed to the metanarrative on which it is based.

At the end of the novel, the readers are introduced to a canonical character from *The Mahabharata*, Arjuna. It is to be

remarked that the blending of canon and non-canon in the text is another feature of postmodernism. With regard to Arjuna who is portrayed as a hyper-masculine character in the original text, there is a marked difference when he appears in Pattanaik's text. In the former, Arjuna was the definition of manhood; he was a skilled archer, he won Draupadi's hand, he had many romantic conquests, marrying several times and fathering many children, and even captivating the celestial Urvashi. But in the latter, Arjuna's insecurities are revealed. When Arjuna tries to conduct the Ashvamedha Yagna, Yuvanashva stops him and questions him regarding the time he spent as a woman and it is at that point that Arjuna recounts his tale. His time as a woman had affected him greatly to the extent that even talking about it was unbearable to him. 'Please don't ask me to remember that year,' he pleaded. Yuvanashva saw the misery in his eyes. (Pattanaik, 162)

A man as virile and manly as Arjuna had been affected so greatly by living as a woman for a year. This is a pointed digression from the original text that seems to hint at Arjuna's insecurities. It may also imply that not placing so much importance on gender would have bettered Arjuna's situation instead of blindly conforming to gender roles.

The multiplicity of truth or the coexistence of multiple truths is another postmodern theme found in the novel. There is no single truth. This is proved through Yuvanashva's character arc. At the beginning of the novel, Yuvanashva is an obedient son and understanding

husband of Simantini, Pulomi and Keshini but at one point, he decided to take back his power. He assumes his position on the throne, and tries to exert his masculinity. One of his attempts at doing that was to order the killing of Somvat and Sumedha. At that point in the narrative, Yuvanashva believed in the truth as something immutable and universal. There could be one truth. There could be only one gender, one was born a man or a woman and they had to live their entire lives constrained by this 'truth'. But after he drinks the magical potion and gives birth to Mandhata, his perspective changes. He longs to be called 'mother' by his son. He does not hold blindly to the truth that since he was born a man, he could not be called mother. In this way, his truth changes resulting in him accepting the multiplicity of truth.

This also extends to Shilavati's narrative. Shilavati is the mother of Yuvanashva. Though she was very devoted to him and took great care of him, she is reluctant to hand over the reins to him when he comes of age. Shilavati was a capable administrator but she was denied the chance to be a ruler merely because she was a woman. These binaries that separate men and women and men's roles and women's roles are proved to be meaningless at the end of the novel.

The bond between Shilavati and Yuvanashva is important. While filial devotion to one's parents is an important theme in the epic of Mahabharata, in this novel, there are limits to one's devotions. The text purposefully juxtaposes the mother-son bond with the one found in the epic. In *The Mahabharata*, Arjuna won the

hand of Draupadi and he should have been the one to marry her. But his mother had instructed him that all her sons must share whatever they won or found. In order to obey this injunction, he shares his 'prize' with his brothers and so Draupadi ends up marrying all the five Pandavas. This devotion and this level of obedience is an example of the grand narrative which is filled with big gestures and actions and larger than life characters. But in Pattanaik's text, Shilavati refuses to step down from the throne so that it can pass to her son. Initially, Yuvanashva does not resist this. He feels the injustice but he does not fight her. This is in accord with the theme of filial devotion to one's parents. But soon, he begins to tire of her ways and fights for his position. This is incongruous with what is expected of heroes. The novel makes this pointed deviation from the norm to display scepticism to old rules and expectations passed down through metanarratives.

This also creates a binary between desire and duty, one that is examined by the researcher, Mital Faldu, in the research paper titled "Duty and Desire at Constant Conflict in the Pregnant King by Devdutt Pattanaik". In the epic, *Mahabharata*, the curbing of desire is needed to follow duty. And it is also hailed as a virtue. But in Pattanaik's narrative, the curbing of desire does not always get the required results, but sometimes even complicates matters. Yuvanashva longs to be a mother in spite of biologically being a man, and he tries to contain his desires in order to perform his duties as a King and as a father. But in the end, he submits to this desire to embrace

his true self. This helps him atone, to some extent, for his earlier sin of killing two innocent people.

There are other themes within the text that lend themselves to a postmodern study. The novel almost reads like a parody at times. Yuvanashva himself is a prime example of this. When he drinks the potion meant to impregnate his wives, for instance, he seems to be parodying drinkers of magic potions like 'soma'. It also leads to arguably hilarious results. Scenes describing Yuvanashva's pregnancy are bizarre yet amusing.

In the same manner, irony is prevalent throughout the text. Yuvanashva, who had been secure in his manhood, who had ordered the killing of Sumedha and Somvat to prove it, later on desires motherhood. He also begins to realise the fluidity of gender after his ordeal. Unlike the wives found in the epic who prove their merit through obedience and chastity, wives like Keshini and Pulomi often find expression through acts of disobedience, Keshini even going so far as to try to break the marriage vow. But the author presents these acts in a sympathetic manner. As for the wives, Simantini, Pulomi and Keshini, though they desperately long for motherhood, in the end it is their husband who ends up pregnant, adding to this theme.

There are also hints of moral ambiguity present in all the protagonists which makes them more human. This ambivalence extends throughout the novel, blurring the boundaries between good and bad or heroes and villains. Yuvanashva makes horrible decisions such as the

killing of two innocent boys yet he is not the villain of the tale as he has a change of heart at the end. Shilavati withholds power from her son, perhaps acting out of selfish reasons but she is not a schemer or villainess. At the end, there is no cathartic moment or no grand finale of triumph for the heroes for there are no binaries like that within the text, making it clear that the novel is a mini narrative.

The novel seamlessly blends the story of the grand epic with its own narrative. It makes references to the legendary story while focusing on Yuvanashva's life. In this way, the epic, *The Mahabharata*, becomes a mere background to the story, in order to give more focus to the mini narrative with its flawed characters and their arcs rather than the grand tale of valour and heroism familiar with readers. Perhaps, this is to display the incredulity towards metanarratives discussed by Lyotard. The novel executes this by using intertextuality.

Throughout the text, there are references to *The Mahabharata* since the novel is itself based on the earlier text. The author uses grand diction to indirectly reference the epic. The imitative style is yet another feature of intertextuality.

They came, the young and the old, the adventurous and the inexperienced, to fight the Pandavas, or the Kauravas, or for dharma. Drupada came because he wanted to settle old scores. Shikhandi because he could not escape destiny. Some came obliged by marriage. Others because death in Kuru-kshetra guaranteed a place in

Amravati, the eternal paradise of the sky-gods. (Pattanaik 8)

The novel states that the plot is not entirely non-canonical. The author reveals that the tale has been recounted twice in *The Mahabharata* with some changes. But the style reveals that this tale is more than just a fabrication. It is a pastiche. In the postmodern age, pastiches are very common. They are also very significant when revisiting metanarratives. This novel functions as a mini narrative by taking a seminal work and creating a pastiche out on it. The themes like life, death, the afterlife, motherhood, devotion to one's parents, the parent-child bond, masculinity, femininity are all subjects that are at the core of *The Mahabharata* yet they have been dealt with in a very different way here. It also creates a blending of high culture and low culture, and even high literature and low literature and the adjunct narrative methods which is typical of intertextuality. The hierarchical differences do not hold much value in this piece as in the original and so the difference between high culture and low culture becomes insignificant. In the end, the royal rituals of Yuvanashva's household are thwarted by two hapless young people, Sumedha and Somvat. Their lives, their practices and their narratives are just as important as Yuvanashva's tale though it does not figure throughout the novel. In the end, Yuvanashva's very redemption is based on them when he realises his attaching undue importance to gender. This kind of treatment with almost marxist undertones differs from *The*

Mahabharata which centres around demigods, heroes and warriors.

When the blending of the literature itself is considered, the novel cannot be classed as high literature or low literature; the themes are epic, the treatment is serious yet there are also lighthearted moments in the text. There is some humour too. When Somvat is cast into the prison after he tries to deceive the queens into believing that he and Sumedha were a couple, he begins to panic. He wistfully remarks that it would have been better if they had really been a couple. No sooner did he think this thought than a strange being appeared before him, Pot-bellied, with short stumpy legs, buttocks as large as pumpkins, breasts as small as onions. (Pattanaik 88)

The narrative voice is alternatively serious and lighthearted, which makes it very fascinating. It is a predominant trait of the postmodern narrative style.

Hyperreality within the text gives it a postmodern touch. Hyperreality is a concept proposed by Baudrillard in his essay, 'Simulacra and Simulations'. In the essay, Baudrillard asks a profound question, what if literature or art is not a representation of reality, but merely of other representations or signs as he calls them? *The Mahabharata* is a part of peoples heritage and it has formed archetypal ideas of many concepts like manhood and womanhood, good and bad and so on. But there are no totalising narratives in the postmodern age which tends to dismantle these narratives.

The novel takes the ideas derived from canon and plays with them. For

example, there were models for masculinity in the older text. Coming back to Arjuna's example, he stands as a model for manhood and manliness. But what if this sign or simulation was not a representation of reality because there was no corresponding reality. That is the question the author asks the readers at the end of the novel when even the great Arjuna is portrayed as an ordinary man who has gone through an extraordinary situation rather than a hyper-masculine man who has overcome all his adversities. This corresponds with Baudrillard's third-stage in his four-stage model that suggests that the sign conceals an absence, which hides the fact that 'the real' is no longer there.

The idealised images of masculinity or femininity presented in advertisements, for instance, may be helpful: these are also copies or representations for which no original exists - no actual people are quite like these, though people might strive to become like them. In his way the image tends to become the reality, and the two tend to become indistinguishable. (Barry 87)

The same could be said of Draupadi also. The fact that not all the chief female characters in this novel display the loyalty, devotion, and sense of duty towards their spouse expected of a 'good wife' is very telling. Pulomi outright

mocks Yuvanashva and Keshini tries to get a child out of wedlock. Simantini, however, falls more into the ideal category of wives. The author portrays these women as having lives and purposes outside of marriage, his sympathetic rendition of female characters like Keshini who tries to get Asanga to give her a child, contrasts with the stereotypical portrayal of women usually portrayed in Indian lore and literature. This can be read as an attempt to portray the hyperreality inherent in the postmodern world. The author tries to imbue his characters with a sense of reality and juxtaposes it with the hyperreality present in the older text on which his novel is based. Though this element was already present, it is through Pattanaik's presentation alongside the older version that this element becomes apparent.

The novel is no doubt is no doubt a tribute to *The Mahabharata*. But the unique portrayal of universal themes and the use of the aforementioned techniques and elements makes the novel a postmodern mini narrative.

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