

Modes of Narration and Narrative Devices in the Mahabharata (Focusing on the Adi Parva)

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I

Like all great works the Mahabharata transcends the time-space limits of the main story it narrates. The universal appeal of the Mahabharata does not need to be reemphasized. It is admitted on all hands. The text itself in many ways and at several places strove consciously to rise above and go beyond the limits imposed by the central tale, the internecine rivalry of the two branches of the Bharata dynasty. That the work narrates innumerable other stories besides the central one, not too closely related to the dynasty or some times not related at all, are well known. The scope of the work is truly of universal proportions. What is also of interest is that the author was aware of it. The well known statement in the very end of the work, *yadihasti tadanyatra, yannehasti na tat kvacchit*,¹ records the author's conscious effort to achieve a universal quality. It is in the same vein that the author utilizes certain consciously chosen narrative modes and devices to break free of the time-space constraints. It is to some of those employed in the Adiparva that this presentation will try to draw attention.

II

Narrators; Chronology of Narration; Violence

First Narration:

That the Mahabharata was said to have been an orally narrated text is well known; our text consistently asserts that this gigantic composition was orally narrated.² Although it challenges our 'modern' sensibilities and credulity rather sharply, till quite recently, it was hardly a rarity to find people who had committed the entire text to memory and were ready to give a non-stop recital of it. William Dalrymple records a modern instance. He writes: "Even today, when the wandering bard has followed the Indian lion into near-extinction --- killed off, in the case of the epic, by Hindi movies and national television -- - it is just possible, in very remote places, to find men who still know the epic. A friend of mine, an anthropologist, met one such wandering storyteller in a little village of

¹ Svargarohana Parva, 5.38

² Stupendous memory feats of early Indians have been amply attested. Entire Vedic samhitas were committed to memory. Elaborate techniques were developed to help memorizing and correctly reciting. Predilection to use oral devices was not due to unfamiliarity with writing. Writing was known and used in India at the very least since the Harappan period.

Andhrapradesh. My friend asked him how he could remember so huge a poem. The bard replied that in his mind each stanza was written on a pebble. The pile of pebble lay before him always ...”³

Narrations/ recitations on two different occasions are categorically recorded in the text itself.⁴ The first was the snake sacrifice (*sarpa satra*) of Janamejaya and second at the *satra* of sage Saunaka at Namisaranya.

At the snake sacrifice (*sarpasatra*) Janamejaya requested Krsnadvaipayana Vyasa to narrate the story of the great battle that his ancestors fought. It was a prevalent custom to narrate stories on the occasions of great sacrifices.⁵ “Sir, you had seen”, said Janamejaya to Vyasa, “with your own eyes both the Kurus and the Pandavas. I want to listen to their life stories (*carita*) narrated by you (*kathyamanam tvaya*). Even though they could smoothly achieve all their undertakings (*aklistakarmanam*), how this difference grew between them and how this all destroying (*bhutantakaranam*) war arose, tell me the history (*vrta*) of all these”⁶. Vyasa then asked one of his students, Vaisampayana, who had accompanied him to the sacrifice to narrate the story.⁷ The exact words of Vyasa to Vaisampayana are interesting and may be quoted. “You have heard from me (*yan mattvah srutavan asi*) how the cleavage developed in the past between the Kurus and the Pandavas. Narrate (*acaksva*) all these to him.”⁸ Vaisampayana then narrated the whole of the Mahabharata at the snake sacrifice. This was the first of the two specifically described recitations of the story of the Mahabharata as recorded in our text.

It was also a fit and proper occasion for the narration. It was natural for a descendent of a great ruling family to be interested in listening to a firsthand account of the great and momentous battle of self destruction his ancestors fought. Moreover, the snake sacrifice itself was a part of the history of the Bharata family; a continuation of the family saga. That way the occasion of the first narration of the Mahabharata was thematically connected with the narrative. Besides this, there was another bond --- violence, retribution and revenge. Violence and revenge are among the principal motifs of the story of the Mahabharata. The snake sacrifice too was occasioned by a sequence of violence and revenge --- king Parkshit violating the sanctity of a hermitage, the death of Parikshit by snake bite, Janamejay’s resolve to avenge the death of his father. And further deep down in the background, a very remote background, there lies another story of sibling rivalry and treachery, the rivalry between the sisters Kadru and Vinata, the mothers of the snakes and birds respectively, leading to the final sequel of the snake sacrifice.

Second Narration:

³ William Darlymple, *City of Djins*, Penguin Books India, 2004, p.323

⁴ Mahabharata, Adiparva, 1.1-19; Adiparva,1.57-58; Adiparva,4.1-2; Adiparva, 53.31-36, Adiparva, 54.16-24

⁵ V.S. Pathak, *Ancient Historians of India*, Bombay 1966 and Gorakhpur 1984, pp.2-5; cf. Sibesh Bhattacharya, *Understanding Itihasa*, Shimla 2010, pp. 25-27

⁶ Adiparva, 54.18-19

⁷ Adiparva, 54.21-24

⁸ Adiparva, 54.22

No such bond, however, existed between the theme of the Mahabharata and the occasion of the Second Narration. During the recitation at the snake sacrifice, Sauti Ugrasrava, the son of Suta Lomaharsana was present. He apparently listened to the whole narration with great interest and rapt attention. After a while the Sauti reached the hermitage of rector Saunaka in Naimisaranya where the latter was engaged in the performance of a twelve-year long *satra*. Requested by the assembled sages there, Sauti Ugrasrava repeated the narration of the Mahabharata at Saunaka's hermitage.⁹ It is this narration by the Sauti in Namisaranya that constitutes the text of the Mahabharata.

The Mahabharata opens with the description of the arrival of Sauti at Saunaka's hermitage and his acceding to the request of the sages to narrate (*pravaksyami*) the wonderful creation (*adbhutamkarmanah*) of Vyasa.¹⁰ This innocuous opening of a tale of violence in a hermitage, an abode of peace and contemplation and far removed from the hub of politics where ambitions and egos collided in wasteful frictions, is worth noting. We will revert back to this point in the last section of our presentation.

It is also worth noting that Sauti Ugrasrava is the 'primary' narrator of the text of the Mahabharata. The account of the earlier narration during the snake sacrifice actually figures as a part of Sauti's narration during Saunaka's *satra*. It is a case of narration within narration. This affords us a glimpse of the interesting, and complex, narrative structure that the text employs. The text begins by challenging the simple chronological order. It opens with a later event, and an event not really related to the main story, the arrival of Sauti to the *satra* of Saunaka. And then it leisurely weaves the matrix of the main story. We will again come back to this flashback technique in the text.

Ugrasrava recitation constitutes the text

However, the important thing for us to note is that the recitation by Ugrasrava, incorporating the earlier narration by Vaisampayana, is the one that constitutes our text of the Mahabharata. Narration put in the mouth of Ugrasrava takes us up to the point of the snake sacrifice. The locale is Naimisaranya. As the narrative reaches the snake sacrifice, the Sauti then presents Vaisampayana as the narrator and the rest of the story is put in the mouth of Vaisampayana. Now, the locale is Janamejaya's sacrificial hall.

It perhaps needs to be stressed that with the commencement of Vaisampayana's narration Sauti's narration does not cease; it continues. Vaisampayana's narration is a part of the narration by Ugrasrava. After the completion of Vaisampayana's narration of the story of the Mahabharata, Sauti again takes up the threads of narration in the concluding verses of the work.¹¹ He begins by saying: 'Hearing this (account) from the best of the Brahmins during the sacrifice, that king Janmejaya was filled with wonder.'¹² It is, we would like to

⁹ Adiparva, chapter 1

¹⁰ Adiparva, 1.1-23

¹¹ Svargarohana, 5.26-54

¹² Svargarohana, 5.26

emphasize again, a case of ‘narration within narration’. Although the bulk of the Mahabharata is put in the mouth of Vaisampayana, from the point of view of the mode of narration, the Sauti Ugrasrava is the prime narrator and the primary location of narration is the hermitage of Saunaka.

More Breakages of Chronology:

Summary Narrations:

Normally flashback technique opens with a later event and then goes on to the main story located in an earlier time span. But once the main story is taken up the normal chronological scheme, i.e., from the earlier to the later, is usually maintained. But the mode of narration employed in the Mahabharata is more complex. The narration moves back and forth over time and does not strictly obey a linear order.¹³ And then, as is well known, the narration leaving the main story often meanders into disparate byways --- *akhyanas*, *itihisas*, didactic material, unrelated or very tenuously related to the main story --- and then leisurely comes back to take up the threads of the main story. Further, the main story of the epic has been told in abridged form as well as in detail.¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the story has been told in abridged form more than once and in different modes of narration. In the Adiparva itself, abridged narrations adopting different devices are found. Already in the first chapter we encounter two abstracts of the main story juxtaposed with each other. They supplement each other and from that angle the later one appears like a continuation of the earlier. At the same time the two also offer a study in contrast.

The first one begins by invoking the imagery of two giant trees with roots and trunks and branches and foliages, the trees with contradictory characteristics: Dhuryodhana, the tree of wrath (*manyumayo*) and Yudhisthira the tree of virtue (*dharmamayo*).¹⁵ And then in thirty verses of straightforward narrative it presents a crisp and synoptic sketch of events, beginning with the reign of Pandu, leading to the terrible war (*vigrahe tumule*) where ksatriyas slaughtered each other (*ahan ksatram parasparam*).¹⁶ It is more or less an impersonal outlining of the story. However, the cause of the clash is attributed here to the opposing values espoused by the two sides imparting the train of events a kind of inevitability.

In contrast, immediately following this one, there is another synopsis of the main events given in the form of ‘lamentations’ (*vilapa*) by Dhrtarastra.¹⁷ At the end of the war in a monologue addressed to Sanjaya, Dhrtarastra recalls the main events leading to the

¹³ Early Indian concept of time generally was non-linear and cyclical; *kalasya kutila gati* was a well known saying about the nature of the movement of time. See Anindita Niyogi Baloslav, *A Study of Time in Indian Philosophy*, Mrml, 1999

¹⁴ ‘This work imparting great lessons has been presented both in detailed and abridged forms by the sage (Vyasa) as the learned persons of this world desire both short and detailed enumeration’ Adiparvan, 1.49

¹⁵ Adiparva, 1.65-66

¹⁶ Adiparva, 1.65-94

¹⁷ Adiparva, 1.95-159

extermination of his line as he reflects over his role in bringing about the tragic outcome.¹⁸ These intensely personal outpourings of his heart by the blind king, partly self-accusing and hugely self-pitying, are not only interesting for a peep into the character of Dhrtarastra but also from the point of view of the mode of narration.

That this *vilapa* appears almost at the very beginning of Adiparva is remarkable; its appropriate place, if chronological order of narration was followed, should have been at the end of war, in the Striparva. This is another instance of the employment of flashback device. But this has more significance than just this. Boldly defying linearity of time a much later occasion (the end of war) has been seized upon to provide a brief pointed preview of the tragic story about to unfold. Interestingly, this preview is clothed in the form of a post-facto viewpoint --- a peep into future in the form of looking back into past. Dhrtarastra *vilapa* comprises a series of couplets each ending with the refrain: “And then Sanjaya, I no longer hoped for victory”. There are other points of differences as well. Thus while the first abstract highlights the main episodes in the story leading to the War; the second one underlines its tragic dimension. The first presents an onlooker’s perspective, the second that of an actor and a losing one at that. The second one highlights, as was natural from the perspective of a loser, on the achievements of the Pandavas and the consequent despondency growing in the mind of Dhrtarastra. A sense of gathering gloom and impending catastrophe pervades it. This mood becomes more pronounced when Dhrtarastra starts reminiscing the phases of war. It is interesting that in the first abstract, the war is disposed off in a single verse referring to the wasteful carnage it led to.¹⁹ But that is done in a rather dry and impersonal manner. Dhrtarastra *vilapa* on the other hand gives far greater details of the war and brings to higher relief the senselessness of the bloodbath.

In the Adiparava still a third abstract is given in the form of *Parvasangraha* where a summary of each Parva is enumerated in sequential order.²⁰ These synopses of the work serve several ends.

Oral Character, Interlocutors:

This brings us to another point that we would like to touch upon: the oral nature of the text. The Mahabharata maintains all through the form of an orally narrated work; in style and presentation it keeps up from end to end the look of a story being told to an assembled audience. Its style and format, however, are not that of a story being dished up to an audience from a platform or a stage. And, it is seldom declamatory. Both in form and style the text is conversational in character. There is a narrator, and there is also an interlocutor. In the primary narration in Naimsaranya, the narrator, we have noted above, is Ugrasrava; the sages in the hermitage are the first interlocutors and then Saunaka takes over that role. In the snake sacrifice narration, Vaisampayana is the narrator and Janamejaya is the interlocutor. The interlocutor helps in carrying the story forward by

¹⁸ The character of Sanjaya is suddenly introduced here without any kind of preparation and without much clue as to his identity and role. The significance of his role becomes clear much later in the work.

¹⁹ Adiparva, 1.94

²⁰ Adiparva, chapter 2

asking questions and making requests; his interventions also help in preventing monotony. We would like to stress that the mode of narration, except for the discursive parts like, say, that of the Bhagavadgita, is not really dialogical in character; the mode of narration is conversational story telling mode. It is in the dialogical *samvada* sections that the role of the interlocutor becomes that of a participant debater/ discussant. In the Early Parvas such debates/ discussions occur very rarely. Even the discussions regarding the propriety of five husbands marrying a single wife²¹ or the legitimacy of Yudhisthira to put his queen at stake in gambling after losing his own free status²² do not fall within the category of *samvada* debates.

The three succeeding summary-presentations, the second following immediately after the first and the third at the heels of the second, are obviously designed to hammer the story-outlines into the minds of the listeners/ readers at the very outset. This follows the same method as is done in classical Indian musical recitals where the main raga without embellishments is introduced right at the very beginning. This was absolutely necessary in a work of such vast proportions, abundant diversions and highly complex architecture. Without this aid, the reader/listener ran the risk of either losing his way or interest or both. It was all the more necessary in an age when a work like the Mahabharata was presented in the form of oral narrations before a listening audience.

III

Universal and Particular

What does the narrative structure of the text signify? We venture to suggest that the narrative devices are not just clever and novel tools to stir and hold the interest of the listeners/readers. There is a purpose beyond that. The structure and the devices have been consciously chosen to serve a consciously chosen end. The purpose is to convey the message that the story basically is one of universal import. At the apparent level it is a story of a specific time-space locus. It is obviously time-space specific; it does not have the 'once upon a time' air or form. It concerns the history of a particular dynasty and it shares the characteristics of *vamsa* literature. Yet it does not lie trapped and frozen in its defined locus. The form and the narrative devices signify the breaking of boundaries of the time-space context of the narrative. Thus for the primary narration of the story the venue chosen is the hermitage in Naimisaranya removed in time and space from the actions of the story. There is more to it than just physical distance. The hermitage in Naimisaranya represents an ambience completely different from that of the Kuru-Pandava family saga. It is interesting that this story of violent family relations has for its audience the Brahmacharins living a life of peaceful pursuits away from family ties. Further, this predominantly Ksatriya account is narrated to an assembly of Brahamana *rsi*. However, at the core Mahabharata remains a *vamsanukirtana* (glories of a dynasty); the major part of which is narrated to king Janamejaya in answer to his specific request to

²¹ Adiparva, 187.22ff, continues in Adiparva, chapters 188-190

²² Sabhaparva, chapter 60

learn about the deeds of his ancestors. These two narrations symbolize the relation between the particular and the universal and the movement from the one to the other. And the passage of the movement --- from the universal to the particular--- is interesting too. It begins with the universal (Naimisaranya) and then moves to the particular (snake sacrifice) and then back to the universal.

Dissolution of Time Space particulars

We have noted above that the snake sacrifice, the occasion for the second narration (second in order of appearance and not chronologically) does not appear as an intrusive element but is neatly woven into the body of the main narrative. And the account of the snake sacrifice and its background is also an account of the Kuru dynasty from the time of Pariksit to that of Janamejaya. In other words, the last part of the history of the house of Kuru is the one that is narrated first and then following the 'flashback' technique the rest of the narrative is taken up. We have already noted some other instances of the employment of this device (Section II).

Similarly, Dhrtarastra *vilapa*, we have seen above, strongly illustrates the calculated resistance to the one-way linearity of temporal movement. Dhrtarastra *vilapa* skillfully mixes all the three temporal divisions --- past, present and future --- and deliberately alters their conventionally accepted interrelationships. We have already noted above that if the chronological order was followed, the *vilapa* should have been placed at the end of the war. The end of the war is the 'present' of the *vilapa*, but in calculated defiance of chronology the *vilapa* is placed right at the very beginning of the narrative. It is not just its positioning, but the form of its content too challenges the accepted idea of the passage of time. For the reader/listener the lamentations of Dhrtarastra serve as a preview of the story, but the preview comes in the form of post-facto perspective. And, that is not all. The form of this post-facto overview is one of prognosis. Conscious efforts to symbolize the dissolving of time-space boundaries and the linearity of time are important elements of the modes of narrations in the Mahabharata. The intention is clear. The dead set linearity of time has been defied to convey that the story although located in a particular timeframe, is not a prisoner of that timeframe; its significance overflows the boundaries of that particular timeframe and carries it to the domain of universality. It thus appears that the narrative modes and devices were consciously chosen to convey that the story of the Mahabharata was of universal import and validity.