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Towards Understanding Dalit Hermeneutics: Re-interpreting Our Mythical Characters from a post-modern perspective

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Abstract

Dalit Hermeneutics (hence referred as DH), as a literary-philosophical approach, can be applied to have a correct understanding of Dalit philosophy and the supposed struggle for equality and dignity. A proposal is therefore made to re-interpret a few iconic mythical characters from a post-modern perspective that eventually go on to subvert our traditional outlook and places the characters in the right perspective.

Key terms: Eklavya, Shabari, Manthara, Dalit Hermeneutics.

INTRODUCTION

1) Ekalavya:

Since ages, the story of Eklavya (a character from the Mahabharata epic) is mentioned as a fine example of exemplary discipleship. The traditional portrayal of Eklavya is seen as a character who had sacrificed his thumb to express his devotion/dedication to his master Dronacharya (though an external student as he had registered himself in the self-study mode). It is also believed that Eklavya surpassed Arjuna in Archery and therefore in order to dissolve all possible competition Dronacharya worked out a strategy to eliminate the Eklavya challenge for good. He asked for the thumb as Guru- dakshina, and perhaps, for this reason, the illustrious master Dronacharya is accused by secularists, communists, and Ambedkarite scholars as anti-Dalit (https://journals.openedition.org/samaj/7111/15/10/2023).

It would be more appropriate to revisit the Eklavya context as descrivbed by Vyasa in the Adiparva (Sarg 131). He states: Does Ekalavya truly regard himself as the teacher's disciple? Well, then, he owes the teacher gurudakshina, which may be translated as a fee. What will the fee be? It will be anything that Drona the guru wishes it to be. Cunningly Drona demands of the peerless young man the thumb of the hand that releases the arrow from the bow. The stratagem is clear—without the crucial digit, Ekalavya will lose all his skill as an archer. Ekalavya does not hesitate for he truly regards Drona as his guru and so is obliged by the ethical code at the heart of pedagogy to give him the gurudakshina— in a moment, he slices off his thumb with a knife. (https://sshankar.net/2018/01/13/what-the-ancient-sanskrit-story-of-ekalavya-can-teach-us-about-the-enterprise-of-higher-education-today/16/10/2023)

In the above narrative, the superior reader would observe Eklavya being discriminated by Drona. However is this the right interpretation? As such, DH involves the analysis and interpretation of Dalit texts and narratives to uncover the underlying meanings and implications embedded in the concept of Dalit. The question apparently is did Dronacharya really do injustice to Eklavya by asking for the thumb as Guru- dakshina? Perhaps a decentring and decolonization of Dalit thought becomes essential here. Eklavya is apparently uplifted from the social caste hierarchy (as he belonged to the marginal low-caste position) on account of Dronacharya's dristi (foresightedness). In fact, Eklavya goes on to invent a new (modern) form of Archery using the index and centre fingers. Thus, Eklavya as a text is blessed with immortality as he analyses, re-interprets, and innovates as a post-modernist would do. He rejects the binary opposition of being a

challenger to Arjuna and thereby transcends caste hierarchy and categorization.

2) Shabari:

Shabari, in the Ramayana, was a lower-caste woman. However, because of her caste, many gurus discriminated her as an untouchable. However, Sage Matanga, (who gave shelter and educated her) while on his deathbed, blessed her and said that Lord Rama himself will meet Shabari and provide moksha to her. Subsequently, Shabari waited every day. She used to collect berries and taste them to ensure their sweetness. And one day, Lord Rama finally visited Shabari's ashram while he was on his way to Lanka to rescue Sita from Ravana. Although it is said that offerings to God should not be tasted, Shabari served tasted berries to Lord Rama. And the deity was so happy with her devotion and love for him that he ate the berries and granted her liberation. Valmiki states,

रामेण तापसी पृष्टा सा सिद्धा सिद्धसम्मता।
शशंस शबरी वृद्धा रामाय प्रत्युपस्थिता।।3.74.10।।

When Rama asked Shabari who was an old, accomplished ascetic adored by Siddhas, she stood in front and replied:

अद्य प्राप्ता तपस्सिद्धिस्तव संदर्शनान्मया।
अद्य मे सफलं तप्तं गुरवश्च सुपूजिताः।।3.74.11।।

On seeing you now my penance has attained fulfilment, my services to my preceptors have borne fruit.

अद्य मे सफलं जन्म स्वर्गश्चैव भविष्यति।
त्वयि देववरे राम पूजिते पुरुषर्षभ।।3.74.12।।
तामुवाच ततो रामश्श्रमणीं संशितव्रताम्।
अर्चितोऽहं त्वया भक्त्या गच्छकामं यथासुखम्।।3.74.31।।

Looking at Shabari who was steadfast in her vow, Rama said, O ascetic, you have worshipped me with devotion. You may go wherever you like (to the world you desire)

इत्युक्ता जटिला वृद्धा चीरकृष्णाजिनाम्बरा।
तस्मिन्मुहूर्ते शबरी देहं जीर्णं जिहासती।।3.74.32।।
अनुज्ञाता तु रामेण हुत्वात्मानं हुताशने।
ज्वलत्पावकसङ्काशा स्वर्गमेव जगाम सा।।3.74.33।।

With matted locks, tattered bark clothes, and deerskin, Shabari consigned her old and emaciated body to the fire at that moment, with the permission of Rama, and ascended to heaven, her body glowing like fire. (https://www.valmikiramayan.net/aranya/sarga74/aranya_74_prose.htm/16/10/2023)

Shabari's story is a prominent narrative that recognizes the unsullied power of devotion (Bhakti). The story breaks free of women's double marginalization theory- One in terms of gender and the other of caste. Shabari defies social conventions when she resolves to leave her home and educate herself. Thus, the Shabari text is not one of victimized mute suffering; rather she symbolizes the Ramayana's relocation of focus from Surpanakha to Shabari.

DH recognizes the importance of lived experiences in the interpretation of ideas, characters, or texts. Shabari gives voice to her own experience by relocating herself in her quest for true knowledge. She symbolizes a deeper understanding of not remaining rooted to a caste, but on the contrary, believes in the self's quest for a soul-quenching experience. Moreover, DH emphasizes upon the dialogical nature of interpretation, which involves a dynamic process between the interpreter and the text. Lord Rama correctly interprets her text which ultimately leads the way to Moksha. Lord Rama not only engages with her live devotion (observed in the sharing of tasted berries) but also acknowledges (through consumption of the pre-tasted berries) her voice leading to her liberation (moksha).

3) Manthara:

Manthara is a character in the Hindu epic Ramayana. She is described as having convinced Queen Kaikeyi that Ayodhya belonged to her son Bharata and that Rama should be exiled from the kingdom. In fact, Manthara reminds Kaikeyi of the two boons Dasharatha had given when she had once saved his life. Manthara advises Kaikeyi to weep and cry in her room, pretending anger. Valmiki states,

मंथरा त्वभ्यसुयिनमुत्सृज्यभरणं च तत्।
उवासेदं ततो वाक्यं कोपदुःखसमन्विता ।। 2-8-1

Manthara, becoming indignant with Kaikeyi, threw down the ornament given to her and with anger and distress spoke the following words:

हर्षं किमिदमस्थाने कृतवत्यसि बालिशे ।
शोकसागरमध्यस्थमात्मानं नवबुध्यसे ।। 2-8-2

"O, foolish one! Not knowing that you are in the midst of an ocean of trouble, what is it that you are so delighted about, in a matter to be grieved?"

मनसा प्रहसामि त्वं देवी दुःखार्धिता सति ।
यच्चोचितव्ये हृष्टसि प्रपयेदं व्यासनं महत् ।। 2-8-3

"Oh, queen! Though stricken with grief, I mentally laugh at you in that you are rejoicing at the time when a great calamity is befalling you."

शोचमि दुर्मतित्वं ते का हि प्रजाना प्रहर्षयेत ।
अरेः सपत्नीपुत्रस्य वृद्धिम् मृत्युमिवगतम् ।। 2-8-4

"I am lamenting over your foolish mind. Does any intelligent woman feel happy over the prosperity of a stepson who is considered an enemy? Does it not amount to praising a befalling death?"(https://www.valmikiramayan.net/utf8/ayodhya/sarga8/ayodhyaroman8.htm/16/10/2023)

Manthara, from a Post-modern perspective successfully attempts to engage with Kaikeyi on **questioning the reality and representation** made in front of her by suggesting an alternative reality. In fact, the two boons serve as the catalyst to initially de-recognize and de-legitimize the authority of the crown Prince Rama.

Accordingly, as the **Mahabharata** and **Ramayana** epics hold a central place in DH, which is based upon the social, political, and economic marginalization both within the society and the holy

spaces, a few positions can be extracted from the texts of Eklavya, Shabari, and Manthara:

(i) Dalit Reality:

The fact that is usually paraded and percolated is that Dalit people have suffered centuries of oppression (based on caste, social and economic injustice; have been denied education; prevented from hearing any scriptures; subjected to punishment, etc.) and this was solely on account of the hegemony of the dominant castes over its scripture and interpretation. In this sense, the DH text is **unlettered and textless** (written). However, the examples of **Eklavya, Shabari, and Manthara** stand- out against this form of projection.

(ii) Dalit Pathos:

All the three characters Eklavya, Shabari, and Manthara not only recognize their roots, their identity and consciousness. In fact, all the three characters correctly read the socio-economic and political text of contemporary times as they are involved in the task of reading both the context and text. Both Mahabharata and Ramayana as epics give us an interpretative understanding of the Dalit social world with its caste ramifications which were more based on functionality rather than one's birth. Eklavya transcends the typical caste narrative and seeks to alternatively engage in a serious sense, with an emancipatory hermeneutics away from the cultural burden of casteism. He does not throw any tantrums when rejected by Dronacharya but rightly looks for an alternative method within the existing but liberal socio-economic framework.

(iii) Dalit Consciousness:

Shabari carries an exemplary illustration which transcends the traditional social, political, cultural, and economic experience of a denied humanity, afflicted with issues of poverty and discrimination, and thereby goes on to symbolize true Dalit Consciousness.

In effect, Manthara questions the defined roles of women through Kaikeyi. Rather than suffering in silence Kaikeyi should take the prerogative and put an end to her suspicions even if it means turning the world around. Her text is deconstructive by nature for it discards the dominant Dashrath text and reconstructs an alternative text through reminiscence of another text (boon) that King Dashrath had apparently forgotten. She thus restores the DH text from enslavement and subordination.

Eklavya, Shabari, and Manthara capture a common spirit that pervades the writings of Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. They rise above the privileged class interpretation and move from the particular to the general, the specific to the non-specific, the individual to the Universal. DH rightly records that it"… does not seek the meaning behind the text which creates distance, **but the meaning in front of the text** which reminds of critical involvement. (emphasis mine),"(https://www.jstor.org/stable/1772040?type AccessWorkflow). The historical backdrop to the **Mahabharata and Ramayana** text is crucial for **Eklavya and Shabari** also epitomize **Unwavering Faith**. In Marxist terms to be in alignment with the subjectivity of the majority, and that is when it will become objective (https://link.springer.com/referenceworkentry/10.1007/978-90-481-9063-8_108).

DH thus emphasizes upon a need to study and interpret other texts, which include folktales, songs, dances, art, and other cultural productions and literary works, and other writings of revolt, protest, revival, telling, and re-telling. These texts are often juxtaposed and brought into conversation with the scriptural text and woven together with the use of imagination and experience. However, a parochial view and a shadowed understanding would show these scriptural icons in poor light. DH would also deal with oral traditions, which are fluid and flexible. These methods provide **new and fresh insights** into the meaning of the scriptural text.

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