

Characters and Multiple *Rasas* in the *Mahabharata*: Charu Sheel Singh's *Scripture on Stone* in Context

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Mahabharata is decidedly the greatest poem of the world. In the Indian tradition, the later day drama was also known as poetry which was divided into *shrbya kavya* and *drishya kavya*. One emphasized the meditation part as it meant listening to a recitation; the later implied a visual representation of the same elements on the stage. As a tale of war, *Mahabharata* elicits the eight *rasas* as expounded by Bharata in his *Natya Shastra*. There are episodes within episodes whose meaning-breeding capacity is endless. Viewed as a genealogical narrative, the story takes us to climaxes that are pathetic, heroic, horrible, lovely among the rest. The warring clans in the epic are the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Their father was Yayati who married the *Naga* dynasty daughter Devyani and Shukracharya's daughter Sharmishtha. Shukracharya was the guru of devils already and *Nagas* were warring tribes living in the North-Western plains of Himalaya. It is clear from the outset that the instincts for war are common to both the tribes. The game of dice is the churning point of the plot. This game has been organized by Duryodhana on the advice of Shakuni, his maternal uncle. The idea is to capture power of the kingdom that Pandavas were ruling, Yudhisthira, the eldest of the Pandavas brothers may be said to represent an ideal structure of mind that can only lead to negative participation, an uneasy calm of which he is a victim throughout. Yudhisthira appears to beget the *shanta rasa* (later added by Abhinav Gupta) which is internally full of commotion. Bhima represents valor and heroism; thereby producing the heroic *rasa*. He is a little bit victimized by his elder brother whose dictates he cannot violate; therefore his heroism does not strike the iron when it is hot. For example, when Duryodhana misbehaves with Draupadi in the *Sabhaparva*, Bhima threatened Duryodhana of dire consequences but Yudhisthira kept Bhima at bay.

The idea that I am trying to postulate is that the *rasas* in *Mahabharata* are form of contingencies since the nature of their operation is such that timely evolutions fail to emerge which ultimately leads to war.

Viewed from a low mimetic angle, Yudhisthira is the mockery of the morals he professes to possess while Bhima, a travesty of circumstances which molest his heroism. Arjuna leads the battle in very many ways but *Sabhaparva* has exposed Bidur, Drona, Bhishma, Kripacharya and the rest of the elderly persons who were attending the party. The desire to see the Draupadi naked is *veebhatsa* (most horrible) at its worst. The assembly goes silent and no body protests except Dushashana who is silenced vehemently. Arjuna is dear to Krishna, the God incarnate. Because Draupadi calls Krishna her brother; so Krishna supplies an endless loom of *Sari* and Duryodhana's dream does not come at a relishing end. Duryodhana has an endless amount of envy, jealousy and hatred for Pandavas in general and Draupadi in particular. The *rasa* of hatred is brought to the fore when Duryodhana goes down into the pond of water mistaking it for the floor of the palace. This makes Draupadi laugh- the laughter having a tinge of irony as well as satire. Duryodhana's move therefore is counter-active. Arjuna is a philosopher entangled in the shortcomings of a man. Krishna is the revelation, the knowledge, the foundation and a player in the game as well as the game itself. He is the onto-genesis of the *rasas* in which He makes the Pandavas and the Kauravas participate. Arjun's refusal to fight the war occasions *Bhagvadgita* which masterly expounds

the theories of *Karma Yoga*, *Raj Yoga*, *Gnan Yoga* and *Bhakti Yoga*. Arjuna listens to such premiums of knowledge and is simply bewildered, for, he is just a man. Even though, Krishna answers all his questions but he is not satisfied. Compelled at his shoddy nature, Krishna shows Arjun his *Virat Rupa* (cosmic form). This forms climaxes of *Veebhatsa* and *Lalitya* both into a transcendental form of sublimity. Arjun closes his eyes for; he is unable to behold what is up in front. He requests Krishna to become his friend again and talk as He did in the former times. Arjun begins to fight even against his own wishes. The *rasa* of heroism cannot get better than this particularly when Bhishma, fighting from the Kauravas' side, broke the wheel of Arjun's chariot and surrounded him with all kinds of arrows. When Krishna looks at Arjun in such a state, he picked up the broken wheel of chariot and ran towards Bhishma. Bhishma had vowed that he would compel Krishna to fight the war even though, for a while. Look at how the *rasa* of heroism is treated as a value as well as intelligence and power. Bhishma throws off his bow and arrows and goes to Krishna for; he has succeeded in his vow.

The over-all structure of *Mahabharata* is the conflict between the high and low mimetic where irony, satire, lampoon and the rest have all their places and where heroic actions fight for values and the churning of emotions are also involved with a view to cater the way to liberation. Bhishma, Drona and Kripacharya knew that they are fighting from the wrong side and they want that the Pandavas should win.

This is strangeness added to wonder- the *rasa* that might lead to chaotic amazement. Arjuna rejects even the benediction of Bhishma who wishes for his victory. This is value of values for Arjuna argues that as long as Bhishma is fighting against him, he is not going to win. Bhishma advises to Arjun to go to Krishna Who knows how Bhishma can go out of battle. The *Mahabharata* story is interwoven with divine graces of Krishna falling upon the Pandavas who are fighting for *Dharma*- truth, righteousness, justice against *Adharma*- the opposite of these.

The point must be made, however, that *Mahabharata* war is a war among the elite clans. The economic structure of the society is not foregrounded in the story. We learn that there are *Dalits*, the downtrodden and the marginalized. They have their traditional professions to earn their livelihood but they are lowered down in the hierarchy and the excellence in their work does not give them any place higher-up the order. This is so because the categories are fixed and we witness at least two examples of what demeaning the human might mean in the great epic.

Karna is a *Soot putra*, the son of a *dasi* (maid servant). He goes to Drona for becoming his disciple so that he could learn the art of bowmanship, among other education. Drona asks Karna his caste and Karna says he is a *Brahmin*. This is knowingly done because in the value system prevalent at that time only *Brahmins* and *Kshatriyas* could receive education. Once it so happened that Drona was sleeping with his head on the thighs of Karna. A reptile or a scorpion comes there and bites Karna, who though remains undisturbed. In the meantime Drona is awakened and he suspects that Karna had spoken a lie to him. A *Brahmin* according to Drona does not have the amount of patience and courage that Karna has shown. This episode is highly unfortunate since Karna's commitment for his Guru is carried back by a clumsy question that relates to caste. Even though the nature of Brahmins is clarified in the process but caste cannot form the basis of *Guru-Shishya* relationship.

The second episode is that of Eklavya himself and the reference to the collection of poems entitled the *Scripture on Stone* (New Delhi: 2007) written by Charu Sheel Singh. Drona refuses to accept Eklavya, the tribal boy- a scheduled tribe in modern day parlance, for no fault of his own. One is not born into a caste; the caste is imposed upon him. It is a pity; our gurus could not see this. Not to be deterred Eklavya makes a clay image of guru Drona and practices archery. As the destiny and time would have it, Drona reaches the forest to see Eklavya practice. Consider the following lines in the poem “Eklavya”:

Eklavyas and Dronas have identical
origins in the chilling windmill
of a life ever on the run; earthy
simplicity cannot eat someone’s flesh
into the dustbins of a classy
mess. Guru’s denial for pupilage
made the universal rest with
the shady shrouded locality
of being wherefrom one has
exists not available to minds
obscene.
(Singh: 41)

The poet exposes Drona’s pretensions of being a guru for he has politicized and even banalized the institution i.e. *gurudom*. The cutting edge of irony cuts a little bit more when the poet says:

Drona could not
believe what the tendrils of his
eyes saw. Anxiety and mistrust
made him stand on a
crust that could have fallen
even before it could
erect itself. (43)

The images in the poem are marauding like Sharks in the high seas. They have catapulting experiences where the poet gives a radical reading of the tradition distilling values in the process and devaluing many all the same. The poem reaches a high water mark when the poet says:

Gurudom
wept into shame as Saraswati
sunk below depths that
the earth stands upon.
guru is not the name
of a shrub that is

thorny to others; guru
is a lotus canopy that
showers umbrella petals

without distinction or
gore. Drona lost the
diamond gold of a moment
in history which would
have made him immortal. (45)

The guru is not a locality nor a tiny shred of memorized wisdom; he is a living whole who lives for ever and ever. He has a tremendous capacity to assimilate rather than disintegrate. Drona is found wanting on both these counts. The poet does not leave us in any doubt as to the difference between the guru and the *guruttva*. Consider the following lines:

Eklavya's guru was Drona for sure and
the pupil could digest
no more on this score.
Drona did not know the ions of
electric wobbling nor did
he feel the pulse of
terrestrial bodies where
guruttva resides. (43)

The poet emphasizes here that the name cannot be greater than the qualities and the qualities are what characterize a guru. *Gurudom* is a process, a consciousness whose choices of will and action do not depend upon the guru, the person; they come straight away from God Himself. It was for this reason that Drona did not realize the transfer of his consciousness from his own being to the clay image that Eklavya had made. The anti-climax, though, comes when the temporal guru asks for the thumb as *Gurudakshina*. There is commitment on the one side and the self centered interest on the other. Drona would like to go with Arjuna than with Eklavya for he is a system's man. Eklavya may be a downtrodden character but it is through him that the values of sincerity, devotion and commitment emerge. Guru is not a profession therefore but a life element which does not make distinction of any kind on any basis.

Drona may be higher in our esteem if he had told Arjun to go and compete with the tribal boy. He does not say this because he knows a defeat to Arjuna would bring bad name to him.

Drona's asking for the thumb of Eklavya is the most horrible (*Veebhatsa*) part of the relationship between a guru and disciple. Eklavya's love for the guru may not generate *Shringar rasa* for that is given to the elites of the society, his love is the cry of a lover from behind the stones that goes into the shrieks of the wind but *gurus* do not listen. This is *Veebhatsa* of another kind. The poem succeeds in elaborating the tragic failure of a culture.

REFERENCE

Charu Sheel Singh, "Eklavya" in *Scripture on Stone* (New Delhi: Adhyayan, 2007)