

DUTY AND DESIRE AT CONSTANT CONFLICT IN THE PREGNANT KING BY DEVDUTT PATTANAİK

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Abstract

For centuries, a conflict between duty and desire; soul and flash has claimed humanity. The story is set in the back drop of the Mahabharata and embodies an eternal conflict where a king has to search struggle his identity in sternly compartmentalized Indian society, where black is black and white is white, any shade in between is discarded as a misfit. The story centres around gender queerness and identity crises but one can clearly see that how each character sustains and suffers due to the choices he /she makes.

Key words: The Mahabharata, Conflict, Duty, Desire

DEVDUTT PATTANAİK: BRIEF CHARACTER SKETCH

Devdutt Pattanaik is a mythologist, author and columnist. He is known for his fictional work which interprets different Indian scriptures. His novels discuss myth in modern perspective. In his fictions, myth is modified and distorted to bring better understanding of life. His novels bring forth ancient values in modern times which make them more relevant and lifelike to the readers. His purpose is to introduce the modern readers with different stories and characters of mythology and serve them with the ancient wisdom. His work on mythology reveals the flexible and all inclusive mind-set of ancient Indian society, where the sages and rishis were the epitome of knowledge and wisdom.

INTRODUCTION

Duty and desire are at two opposite poles yet it can be seen as two opposite sides of the same coin, which makes them inseparable and equally important. Each and every action of man is inspired by either duty or desire. Duty stands for what one should do and desire express what one actually wants to do. To maintain balance between these two is essential for stable society and integrated life. When one sternly follows his duty and neglects desires, he will succumb to those suppressed desires one day. As suppressed desires are like volcano, it will burn your heart silently and one day will explode with all its force, creating a great imbalance in your mental and emotional world. In the same way, life entirely controlled by desires will lead to indifference towards the society and the surrounding that sustain us. Each man has some moral obligations towards his society, his people and his nation. In the same way, each man has personal ambitions, feelings and desires. To live a healthy and fulfilling life, a person has to learn to decide his priorities as per the need of an hour.

The society of the Mahabharata has its foundation on Dharma. Right from the ancient times, Dharma was the scale to measure one's action and which ultimately decides one's character. Dharma makes an individual aware of his duty as a human. Dharma enlightens one about what is right and what is wrong. The civilization can't sustain without dharma and dharma manifests in the form of duty, one's duty towards one's society, family and oneself. Man has always been preached to live a duty bound life to earn the merits of society. The man who performs his duty without being distracted by petty desires is honoured as noble beings. The society condemns those who chase their desires, letting their duty slip in the abyss.

Desires are intrinsic element of human existence. Desires make a human feel alive. Without desires, the human life cannot thrive. Desires inspire man to compete, to fight and to conquer. A man's duty may vary as per his status in the society and his role in the family but a man's desires never vary. A king's duty may differ him from a commoner but his desire to love and to be loved is just like any other man. Even literary writing finds its root in desire, as stated by Bennett and Royle, "In the context of literature more generally, we can begin to think about the importance of desire in two fundamental ways. In the first place, we would suggest that every literary text is in some way about desire" (208).

Yuvanashva, the protagonist of the story is the king of Vallabhi, born in Turuvasu clan. A true man in every aspect but fails to father a child. As per dharma shashtra, a man cannot become a king unless he fulfils his obligation towards his ancestors by siring an heir. Yuvanashva's fate was such that even after having three

queens and going through all the medications and rituals to father a child, his prayers remain unanswered. Eventually, he decides to create a child by sorcery. But unfortunately, Yuvanashva gets tricked to drink the magic potion meant to impregnate his wives. And thus he accidentally becomes mother of his firstborn. Seeing his child, motherhood blossoms in him in million folds, covering everything masculine in him. The sweet pain in his heart, tears in his eyes and milk flowing from his bosom show his deep affection for his child which only mother can have. He fails to understand these strange feelings but at the same time can't resist them. The irony is that the king who ought to be an epitome of masculinity and dharma, craves to be called 'mother'. His duty as a king cannot withhold his desires to be mother of his child.

The unending battle between duty and desire starts with the character of Shilavati, Yuvanashva's mother. She is the eldest daughter of Ahuka, king of Avanti. Though not educated formally, she is well versed in Dharma Shastra and an ideal candidate to become king. But fate plays a ruthless game by giving her a man's head and a woman's body. She can never become king but she can be a king maker. She gets married with Prasenajit, prince of Vallabhi, who is destined to die in the eighteenth year of his life, two years after his marriage and two months before the birth of his child. When her husband dies, Shilavati has no time to mourn; she has a whole kingdom to save. She cannot allow her kingdom to succumb to chaos, especially when the future king was already taking shape in her womb.

Shilavati's duty as a widow of the king is to be regent of the kingdom while her heart desires for the throne, for complete authority. Being widow, it is her duty to have simple meal of fruits, milk and rice. She has to eat on a banana leaf, while her heart craves for meat and fish and all those spicy dishes she used to cook for her son. She takes a great care to provide a good upbringing to young prince and at same time deals with all the political matters of kingdom. The kingdom prospers under wise and diplomatic reign of Shilavati. The woman, more capable than her brother, her husband and her son to become an ideal king but can't wear the crown because dharma denies it. She knows her desires can't overtake her duty as her duty as mother denies her desires as a woman. She allows duty to lead her and wins affection of her son and respect of whole kingdom.

Shilavati, during her peaceful reign was continuously guided and supported by Mandavya, their guru. Mandavya supported the kingdom in thick and thins. He was the one who secured Shilavati's hand for Prasenajit. He knows Shilavati was more capable than her husband to rule the kingdom. But even a man well versed and self-restraint cannot escape the claws of desire. He is aware of Shilavati as a woman and cannot hold his desire to have her. When eight months after Yuvanashva's birth, Priests suggests that prince must sit on the throne but the child would not leave his mother, Mandavya suggest that Shilavati should sit on the throne with Yuvanashva in her lap. Holding a bow for her son and with a silver parasol behind her, she looks no less than a king. At this moment Mandavya gets struck by Kama's arrow, that night he makes fierce love with her wife. After planting his seed in her, he weeps. His tears are proof that he is holding some secret in his heart. Mandavya is very well aware that he should treat Shilavati as his daughter-in-law, and therefore he is not allowed to have any such vile desires. But after all he is a human. Shilavati's desirable body and irresistible charms strikes him just like any other men. But he checks his desire on time and breaks the arrow of Kama mid-air. In the conflict of duty and desire, he let his duty as a guru prevail. But the desire keeps lurking somewhere deep in his heart, waiting for an opportunity to get revealed.

Mandavya's younger son Vipula is a good friend of Yuvanashva. Vipula is a loyal and dedicated friend. He is not afraid of telling truth no matter how hard it sounds. Being born in the family of Acharya, he is very well aware of one's duty as a son, as brother and as a friend. When his younger brother expresses his wish to join Angirasa, their father insists on having a wife first. No man can deny his duty to father a child and to pay his debt to his ancestors. Vipula very well aware of his brothers desire of staying away from family fetters, offers his wife to his younger brother.

Vipula does so to fulfil his duty as a brother, but he is never able to forget the fact that his wife slept with his brother. The sight of a child born out of that union always fills his heart with jealousy. His wife becomes a stranger for him forever. Later, when Yuvanashva proposed niyoga to impregnate his wives, Vipula very sharply retorts the suggestion, saying that nothing will remain the same. This shows how hard it is for him to carry the burden of duty. And sometimes that weight is so heavy it crushed all the desires beneath it, leaving a person emotionally dead.

When all the other ways to sire an heir fail, Yuvanashva decides to create a child through sorcery and for that two Siddhas; Yaja and Upyaja are invited to perform Yajna. During the ceremony, Upyaja suggests that when Yajna pauses, the queens can go to the temple of Illeshwara Mahadeva to distribute cows to the childless Brahmin couple. And thus enters two boys in the story; Somvat and Sumedha. Somvat dressed as a woman, to play wife of Sumedha. Both are best friends, but out of desperate need they decide to play this foul trick to earn a cow. But unfortunately, they are caught and accused of masquerading as Brahman couple to gain the charity. When queens come to know that they washed the feet of this couple and fed them with other Brahmins, they were inconsolable. They fear that this act will earn them demerit and will doom the Yajna. They fear the angry Gods won't let them have child. The news spread in the town that how two Brahmin boys duped queens. The people demanded them to be killed. When Somvat realises that death is about to succumb them, He wishes to be a woman. His prayer is heard by a yaksha named sthunakarna, who is desperate to get his manhood back. When he asks Somvat to become woman, he agitates for a while. He is aware of women's role and status in the

society. But his desire to be with Sumedha's his wife, to bare his children, to live together as a family makes him agree to give his manhood and become woman.

The decision taken drawn by desire bares a terrible consequence. The civilized society has its own code of conduct; they don't accept what they don't understand. This transformation of Somvat from man to woman is sternly denied by the king as well as the court. Yuvanashva gives two option to the boy now a woman. Either Somvat or Sumedha marry the girls promised to them and fulfil their obligation towards their ancestors. This way Somvati has to pretend to be man all her life, killing her desire to be Sumedha's wife and Sumedha, who has already accepted Somvati as his wife, has to spend his whole life with some other woman in a loveless marriage. Or they will have to walk on pyre next morning. The couple choose to die together holding each other's hand for what they believed. Somvati chooses death than living her life pretending to be someone she is not. For her, death was sweeter than bitter rejection of society. Sumedha chooses to die than marrying someone he doesn't love. He recognises the sacrifice his friend gave to save his life. For him his loyalty to a friend is more important than approval of society. They cling to what they desire as an individual and as a couple, discarding their duties decided by the society. They die as a Brahmin couple and come back as Pisachas to seek approval of Yuvanashva. Yama, the god of death, rejects them for what they are just like Yuvanashva, the king of living. They can't cross Vaitarni, unless Yuvanashva, their creator, identify them as a woman and a man.

The murder of Brahman couple creates such a commotion in the kingdom that all forget about the Yajna and the potion. Yaja and Upyaja feel that distraction and disruption. The seed of Yuvanashva is ready but there is no soil to accept it. Unable to decide what to do with the potion, they leave the pot of potion in the Mahasabha, beside a lamp, for the king to decide who should carry the seed.

Yuvanashva enters Mahasabha exhausted. He sits on the throne, the Mahasabha is deserted. He demands for water. At that moment, two pisachas appear in front of him, a Brahmin couple. Yuvanashva sealed their destiny by rejecting their identity and thus he became their creator, their father. Yuvanashva was started to hear the voice calling him, 'father'. He saw two pisachas standing in front of him. Yama asked them many questions before they cross Vaitarni, which they were unable to answer. They want Yuvanashva to help them seek those answers. The decree of Yama denies them as a man and a woman; a husband and a wife cause decree of the king identified them as two man. That is why they became pisachas; they want Yuvanashva to change his decree so that they can become Pitrs. But Yuvanashva still charged with the newly rather forcefully attained power as a king ignores them. When again he asks for water, the pisachas trick him to drink potion. Yuvanashva too tired to make the difference, drinks it. But this is not the moment that got him trapped in the crisis of identity, that moment happened long back in the Mahasabha.

Yuvanashva, driven by desire to show his prowess as an able king, decides to hear the case in the Mahasabha. When the two boys were presented in the court, it was quite evident that one was a man and another woman. But the witnesses said otherwise. When the debate regarding the boy's sudden transformation was going on, Shilavati's servant entered the court to convey her message. The message said that Shikhandi rode on Krishna's Chariot in the battlefield. It meant that Pandavas accepted Shikhandi a man, who was born as a woman. Pandavas won the war, Dharma was standing at their side. She further asked her son to accept Somvat as a woman, as that was dharma. But Yuvanashva too eager to take power, neglected her mother's advice. And thus his duty; his dharma as an impartial judge gets crushed under his desire to gain supremacy as a king. His judgement was not driven by dharma, it was driven by desire. And before he could decide the destiny of the two boys, he sealed his own destiny.

And thus his desire to have a child and to become a king got fulfilled but not the way he wanted. He bears a child in his body. When Shilavati comes to know about her pregnant son, she keeps it a secret and declares Simanthini, Yuvanashva's first wife as a mother of this mysteriously born child. Yuvanashva longs to be called mother but his duty as king denies his desire of motherhood. He knows he has to sacrifice his desire to maintain the order of society. But ultimately, he decides to reveal this secret to hear the sweet call of his child calling him mother. He violates his karma as a king by burning the Brahmin couple. He rejects to identify them as what they are a man and a woman. In return, his karma violates him by creating life inside his body. Which put a question mark on his being man, and thus being the king? His identity just like the identity of Somvati and Sumedha is on jeopardy. Though he rejects Somvati as a woman, he is never able to reject himself as a mother. Just as Somvati yearns to be accepted as a woman, he yearns to be accepted as a mother. As he rejects Somvati as a woman, his son; Mandhata rejects him as a mother. Just as Somvati refuses to cross Vaitarni as a man; he refuses to cross it as a father.

And just like those two pisachas seeking their answers, Yuvanashva wakes up each morning with a hope to seek his identity. His curiosity to know about such man who lived as a woman or who became mother led him into dense forest full of stories, all complex, all confound but none capable to answer his question. Arjuna tells his story when he spent thirteenth year of his exile as Brihanalla, a man, who lost his manhood but yet felt like man. His identity crisis led him to desire both a man and a woman. However, he cut those threads of desire n led his dharma win. But Brihanalla is not an answer of Yuvanashva's question because she does not have womb. She did not birth a child

When maddened by his desire to called 'mother', he reveals the truth, his world turns upside down. The equilibrium of existence is disturbed. The code of Dharma is broken. Madhata rejects the king who calls himself his mother. This rejection tears Yuvanashva's heart. The society laughs at him. The Dharma rejects his kingship. Eventually, Yuvanashva drops his royalty along with all the worldly relations and takes the path of forest. In forest, no rules of civilization apply. No one judges you for what you are. The only rule the forest apply is the rule of survival. Yuvanashva is free to call himself a mother and no one would laugh at him or reject him. but his quest of identity never ends. In the society, he asks who is he? A man or a woman. In the palace, he asks who is he? A mother or a father and in the jingle he asks who is he? A flesh or a soul. This conflict seems to never end.

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