

“An Analytical Study of The Mahabharata As An Epic”.

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Abstract :

The Mahabharata is considered to be the historical and philosophical treatise of India written in epic form. It is the world's largest epic book. It contains about one lakh verses, which is believed to be seven times more than the Iliad and the Odyssey. The Bhagwad Gita is only a small part of the Mahabharata. The Mahabharata contains the essence of the Vedas and other Hindu texts. The poet portrayed all the characters with the power of super human in the Mahabharata. It is enriched with supernatural elements. Their supernatural values make the much more alive than ever in the history of Indian epics. We could learn many moral lessons from the Mahabharata like stand by right; even fight for it, half knowledge can be dangerous , the eternal bond of friendship etc. The poet uses figure of speech in epic like epic simile and exaggeration. Dharma is the major theme of the Mahabharata. It is considered as one of the greatest epic in world literature.

Key-words : Epic , poem, Mahabharata, hero, war, dharma, god.

❖ Introduction :

The Mahabharata is an Indian epic where the main story revolves around two branches of a family – the Pandavas and the Kauravas, who in the Kurukshetra war, battle for the throne of Hastinapur. Interwoven into this narrative are several smaller stories about people dead or living and philosophical discourses. Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa, himself a character in the epic, composed it; as according to tradition, he dictated the verses and Ganesha wrote them down. At 100000 verses, it is the longest epic poem ever written, generally thought to have been composed in the 4th century BC or earlier. The events in the epic play out in the Indian subcontinent and surrounding areas. It was first narrated by a student of Vyasa at a snake sacrifice of the great grandson of one of the major characters of the story. Including within it the Bhagavad Gita, the Mahabharata is one of the most important texts of an ancient Indian, indeed world literature. It is said that ,

“ ऋषिर्वाचं ब्रूवन् ऋषिर्वाचं ब्रूवन् ऋषिर्वाचं ब्रूवन् ऋषिर्वाचं ब्रूवन् ”

It means which is not in Mahabharata, that is not found in Bharata. This line is the biggest complement for the book. within the Indian tradition it is sometimes called the fifth Veda.

❖ Definition of an epic :

“Epic is a long narrative poem recounting heroic deeds...literary usage, the term encompasses both oral and written compositions”.

According to Webster's new world dictionary, “Epic is a long narrative poem in a dignified style about the deeds of a traditional or historical hero or heroes, typically a poem like Iliad or the Odyssey with certain formal characteristics”.

❖ What is an Epic ? :

- An epic in its most specific sense is a genre of classical poetry originating in Greece.
- It is long narrative about a serious or worthy traditional subject.
- Its diction is elevated in style. it employs a formal, dignified, objective tone and many figure of speech.
- The narrative focused on the exploits of a hero or demigod who represents the cultural values of a race, nation or religious group.
- The hero's success or failure will determine the fate of that people or nation.
- The action contains superhuman feats of strength or military prowess.
- The action takes place in a vast setting and covers a wide geographic area. The setting is frequently some time in the remote past.
- Gods or supernatural elements being frequently take part in the action to affect the outcome.
- The poem begins with the invocation of a Muse to inspire the poet, prayer to an appropriate supernatural being. The speaker asks that this being provide him the suitable emotion, creativity or word to finish the poem.
- The narrative starts in medias res, in the middle of the action. Subsequently the earlier events leading up to the start of the poem will be recounted in the characters narratives or in flashbacks.
- The epic contains long catalogues of heroes or important characters, focusing on highborn kings and great warriors rather than peasants and commoners.
- The epic employs extended similes at appropriate spots of the story, and a traditional scenes of extended description in which the hero arms himself.

❖ Mahabharata as an epic :

The first and foremost characteristics of an epic is its bulky size. An epic is an extensive and prolonged narrative in verse. Usually every single epic has been broken down in to multiple books. In the Mahabharata we can see that it is divided into total 18 parvas and each parva divided into 5 to 22 subparvas and also into many Adhyayas.

Another essential feature of an epic is the fact that it dwells upon the achievements of a historical or traditional hero, or a person of national or international significance. Every epic extended the valour, deeds, bravery and personality of a person, who is having incredible physical and mental traits. In the Mahabharata we can note that many heroes who have incredible achievements and personality which is notable like, Shreekrishna, Arjun, Bhishma, Karna, Drona, Bheema, Duryodhana and Abhimanyu.

Exaggeration is also an important part of an epic. The poet often uses hyperbole to exaggerate the character and powers of the hero. Exaggeration can be a rhetorical device or figure of speech. It may be used to evoke strong feeling or to create a strong impression. Exaggeration is used to create emphasis or effect. In the Mahabharata poet uses exaggeration and exaggerates on many characters to create emphasis or effect.

Supernaturalism is a must have feature of an every epic. Without having to use supernatural elements, no epic would certainly produce horror and wonder. Poets use characters like gods, demons, angels, fairies, supernatural forces like natural catastrophes to fill the reader with terrified and wonder. The term supernatural is related with anything that is beyond normal and magical. The epic Mahabharata is enriched with supernatural elements. Hero worshipping is the main concept in this epic. In the Mahabharata almost all the characters have the super naturalistic qualities. There are too many characters who are an incarnation of God or belong to some unrealistic race. Their supernatural values make them much more alive than ever in the history of Indian epics. In the Mahabharata, various astras used by the warriors during their epic battles. One of them for example, is the sudarshana chakra used by Krishna and made by Vishvakarma. This weapon would return to its owners after disposing of an enemy.

Morality is a key characteristics of an epic. The poet's foremost purpose in writing an epic is to give a moral lesson to his readers. There are many lessons we could learn from the Mahabharata like,

- A revengeful instinct can only lead to one's doom : Mahabharata may revolve around the war of duty. But we cannot escape the fact that the major reason behind the destruction of all was revenge. The Kauravas lost everything to their blinded desire to ruin the Pandavas.
- Stand by what's right; even fight for it : Arjuna was initially hesitant to wage war against his kin. But Krishna reminded him that one has to stand by Dharma (duty), even if it meant going against one's own family. Therefore, Arjuna had to fulfil his responsibility as a great warrior of Dharma.

- The eternal bond of friendship : The friendship of Krishna and Arjuna is something all of us look up to. It is perhaps because of Krishna's unconditional support and motivation that the Pandavas managed to survive the war. None of us can forget the epic dice scene where it was Krishna who came to Draupadi's rescue while her husbands gambled her away to disgrace. The friendship between Karna and Duryodhana, on other hand , is no less inspiring.
 - Half knowledge can be dangerous : Arjuna's son Abhimanyu teaches us how half knowledge can have an adverse impact. While Abhimanyu knew how to enter the chakravyuh, he did not know the way out.
 - Don't be swayed by greed: What did Yudhisthir win out of greed? on the contrary ,he lost everything he possessed from his kingdom to his wealth. And to gamble away a woman in the pursuit of hubris ! How can one possibly justify that ?
 - We cannot give up on life despite all hurdles : Who can be a better example for this than Karna ? Right from his birth , the 'suta-putra' battled his way through life, fighting discrimination and disgrace at every stage. He almost became a puppet in the hands of fate. But no obstacle could ever deter him from pursuing his goal. And his devotion towards his mother knew no bounds, to the extent that he even gave up his Kavajkundal (his life saving power) on her demand.
 - Being a woman does not make you a lesser individual : Draupadi was manoeuvred into taking five husbands, she was humiliated by the Kauravas for the fault of her own husband. She was violated but she was bold enough to take a stand. She ensured she got justice by vowing to wash her hair with the blood of Duryodhana and Dushashana perhaps another reason that led to the war. A women like Draupadi will not be passive, she will be fiery, she will fight for herself.
- So many moral lessons we could learn from an epic the Mahabharata.

The theme of each epic is sublime, attractive and having universal significance. Dharma is the central theme of the Mahabharata. Dharma ,most simply put is the destiny and responsibility of an individual. Everyone has a different dharma, and it is his or her obligation to follow it. Yudhisthira is portrayed as a righteous king who closely follows his dharma, while Duryodhana is said to live in defiance of his dharma. Hence the conflict between the two that drives this story acts as a parable about mans conflict between living in accordance with dharma versus failing his dharma. Furthermore hypocrisy, action, caste, the tragedy of war, Gods and humans and storytelling are the major themes of the Mahabharata.

Invocation to the Muse is another important quality of an epic. The poet at the very beginning of the ,seeks the help of the muse writing his epic. The poet asks that this being provide him the suitable emotion ,creativity or words to finish the poem. Similarly in the Mahabharata the beginning of the poem the poet Vyasa pray to goddess Sarswati for provide him a suitable emotion, creativity or words to finish the poem.

The first sloka of the Mahabharata,

“ ऋषिर्वाच ॥ द्रुपद उवाच ॥
 धर्मक्षेत्रे कुरुक्षेत्रे समवेता युयुतसः ॥
 मामकाः पाण्डवाश्चैव ततः ॥ ”

It means , “To lord Narayana, to the best among the men Arjuna , to devi sarswati , and to sage Vyasa must we pray our respectful and exalted salutation first, and then we must utter about Jayam (means Mahabharata)”.

Use of epic simile is another feature of an epic .Epic simile is far-fetched comparison between two objects, which runs through many lines to describe the valour, bravery and gigantic stature of the hero. It is also called Homeric simile. In the Mahabharata the poet uses many times epic simile, like once Dhritarastra reminds to Duryodhana the power of pandavas and he said to Duryodhana,

“You are so stupid that you want to seize him ,like a child who wants the moon”.

In “persistence” Dhritarastra scolds his son Duryodhana for seeking war against Yudhisthira, likening him to a child that wants the moon. He extends the simile by saying that you cannot seize the wind with your hand ,meaning that Duryodhana is attempting to manipulate forces that are far greater and more powerful than any human can control.

Conclusion

As a conclusive part of an epic, we can say that the Mahabharata is the greatest ancient Indian epic ,indeed world literature. We can find out all the key characteristics of an epic in the Mahabharata like, its bulky size, achievements of historical or traditional heroes, supernaturalism, morality, invocation of the muse, attractive and sublime themes, epic simile etc, so we can say that the Mahabharata is one of the greatest ancient Indian epic.

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