

Praxis of Power in Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice: Duryodhana's Mahabharata*

DR JASMINE ANDREW,
Associate Professor and Head ,
Department of English & Research Centre,
Rani Anna Govt. College for Women,
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar
University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli)
Tirunelveli-627008

DEEPA RATHNA C. R,
Reg. No: 19211174012021,
Research Scholar,
Rani Anna Govt. College for Women,
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar
University, Abishekapatti, Tirunelveli)
Tirunelveli-627008

Abstract

This paper aims to explore the multi-dimensions of power and the ways it is wielded in Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice: Duryodhana's Mahabharata*. In the current era, many authors have attempted to reconstruct myth especially on insignificant characters from the main text, making them more appealing with their own imagination blended with the outline of the widely known main story. Anand Neelakantan, an exemplary author in reconstructing mythology, is one among them. He has reconstructed myth by shedding light on the vanquished, narrating his texts from the point of view of the defeated villains like Ravana, Baali and Duryodhana. Even though the well-known complexity in the epic which is debated even today by the critics is the concept called Dharma, the main force which drives every character in some way or the other is their rapacity for power. Power has different meanings in various branches of studies. However the most widely acknowledged definition of power is the ability of a person to influence someone to do something. Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* is one such political arena to explore the different phases of power. This paper focuses on the praxis of power and its monopolistic nature in Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* through diverse characters belonging to different social classes.

Keywords: Power, Education, Poverty, Legitimacy, Hierarchy, Revolution

Myth, a tree with numerous branches bears every kind of fruit for humanity to cherish. These folklores consist of numerous metaphors conveying profound meaning and they foreground the beliefs and customs of different communities. Myth, which forms a part of a country's identity, is the basis of many cultures and their practices followed in the society. India has many versions of mythology for her children to narrate. However, the myths found or believed in other countries also have the same design ornamented with different storylines. These myths are grand narratives, an amalgamation of stories within a story. Every community has its own myth, culture, tradition, rituals, and beliefs to believe in which further paves the way for these metanarratives to develop offshoots. The accuracy of the facts in the epic which dated back to numerous decades is partly mirrored in the retellings and it is also based on individual subjectivity.

Duryodhana is the anti-hero who possesses all the attributes of the conventional hero and who is also equally competent to Bhima in Neelakantan's novel *Roll of the Dice*. The name 'Duryodhana' literally mean 'someone who is difficult to conquer'. This well-known despicable character in the *Mahabharata* is known by his birth name 'Suyodhana' which means 'a good fighter'. In an equivalent way, Neelakantan has delineated Duryodhana as a powerful warrior who cannot be trounced easily. On the contrary, the epic which vastly narrates the magnanimity of the divine characters projects Duryodhana as a malicious and deceitful character for his personal desire for power and he is notoriously known for his deeds against the noble Pandavas. By changing the wind's course, Anand has given voice to Duryodhana by illuminating the deep corners of his mind where his kindness towards his country lies hindered. In Anand's novel, Duryodhana is established as a humanistic character who promotes social mobility. As Gemma Doyle, a character in *The Sweet Far Thing* states, "Power changes everything till it is difficult to say who are the heroes who the villains" (Libba, ch. 31). Power is the main force which differentiates heroes from villains and villains from heroes.

Power can take various forms. It aims to dominate as well as to liberate. It can be either good or evil. The objectives of power cannot be predicted. Power can be wielded by anyone who wishes to seek it. It does not depend on the nature of an individual who possesses power as it also has the capacity to corrupt a person or the person who has power can use it unlawfully. People who have this power dominate others who are below them and they also use this power to overpower or uplift someone above their social status. Duryodhana is one well-known character in mythology who is believed to have misused his power against his country and his cousins, the Pandavas. On the contrary, in Neelakantan's novel Duryodhana is the one who strives to follow the rules even on the verge of death on the battlefield. There are also many minor characters other than Duryodhana whose power is unlawful in Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice*.

In Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice*, the influential characters use two kinds of power: hard power and soft power. The propensity of an individual to influence others through force is hard power. It can be done either through an army, sanction or money. Bhima, Drona, Dhaumya, Shakuni, Purochana, Eklavya and the Pandavas as a whole use this kind of power in distinct ways. All these people belong to different communities in the novel. The Pandavas are believed to be divine progenies; Drona is a Brahmin preceptor who teaches the Pandavas and the Kauravas; Dhaumya is a diabolic Brahmin teacher who deceives everyone using his own scriptural knowledge for his personal gain; Shakuni is a malicious Prince of Gandhara who uses money as a powerful weapon to forge people and to take revenge for the destruction of Gandhara; Purochana is the Chief Inspector of City Hygiene in Hastinapur corrupted by Shakuni who further corrupts Durjaya, a vicious underworld leader in Hastinapur; Eklavya, a Nishada, is a forest dweller and a competent archer to Arjuna, who learnt archery from Drona by hiding near the royal grounds. In this way, Power forms a circuit, corrupting everyone in its way irrespective of their caste or social status.

The first part of *Roll of the Dice* begins with the childhood of the Pandavas and the Kauravas. Bhima, the mighty warrior in the epic, uses his physical prowess to inflict harm on Duryodhana and his cousins whom he thinks weaker than him. He often finds merriment in chasing dogs and his cousins. He is also a man of action who follows commands without a second thought about the consequences of the aftermath. One of the instances which manifest Bhima as a man of action is when he follows Krishna's order in killing the King of Magadha. On the other hand, Drona, a Brahmin preceptor who firmly believes and propagates the idea that education is for the high caste people, teaches scripture and warfare only to the members of the royal family. He uses his power as a teacher by asking for *gurudakshina* from Arjuna to take revenge on King Drupada who insulted him years ago. He also asks for Eklavya's right thumb as *gurudakshina* in order to make Arjuna, an invincible archer. Eklavya, a Nishada by caste in the novel, sees Jara, a boy of unknown caste as inferior to him. During the time of poverty and famine, Eklavya sees Jara as a parasite clinging to his family for food which already has more than five people to feed. He treats Jara as an animal. Even though these characters exert different forms of power on each other, power acts as a chain that spread throughout the society. There is a circulation of power within the levels of hierarchy.

People on the crown of hierarchy use their birthright of being born into a royal family and the caste system as a power to frame rules and break rules according to their wishes. As Krishna states in the chapter A City Cursed, "While the rulers make the rules, as their duty, they will break them when required, as their privilege. The rulers may be cursed in private but in public, they will always be respected, envied and feared" (*Roll of the Dice* 383). They firmly believe that it is their privilege to break the rules they framed and often quote from *smritis* to justify their misdeeds. One such instance is the clearing of the Khandava forest to build the Pandava palace Indraprastha. They killed every beast and forest tribe that tried to escape the forest fire set by the Pandavas. They justify their actions as it is their duty to provide moksha to the forest dwellers by killing them. As stated by John Adams in a letter to Thomas Jefferson, "Power always sincerely, conscientiously, *de tres bon foi* believes itself right. Power always thinks it has a great soul and vast views, beyond the comprehension of the weak" (qtd. in *John Adams*, Introduction xi). One of the reasons for Kurukshetra War at the end of *Roll of the Dice* is for the kingdom which has to be belonged to the eldest heir of the Kuru lineage. However, both the sides believe that they are the rightful heirs to the throne. By using the caste system as a weapon framed by them, they impose harsh rules to be followed by the common people. They prohibit education to them by claiming that it is against the caste rules and to preserve the social order. This makes these people forever ignorant slaves to their masters.

Rather than coercing someone to do a favour, a few characters use soft power as a tactical gambit. Soft power is non-coercive and can be achieved by forming a group with people having same cultural values. With this soft power, they attract, persuade and influence 'others' to do something. These characters mostly target beggarly people who they can persuade easily as well as skilful characters who can help them with their strategies. In the novel, when the kings and priests and those who are in the high social ranks relish a luxurious life by wearing gilded ornaments, giving expensive banquets and conducting lavish ceremonies to show their power, there are also multitudes of destitute suffering due to poverty and famine. These people who dream of escaping this harsh reality of life are caught by vindictive rebels like Durjaya and Takasha. Takasha is a Naga and a forest dweller who leads a group of poor forest tribes. He persuades these people to believe that they are on the right path of the rebellion against the cruel administration of the government. These pretending revolutionists propagandize the neglected and the impoverished to make use of them as pawns in their play. One occasion which expounds this situation is Takasha's multiple attempts to kidnap Eklavya and trying to coax him to join Takasha's army of Nagas and forest tribes to fight against the government. As George Orwell states in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, "Power is not a means, it is an end. One does not establish a dictatorship in order to safeguard revolution; one makes the revolution in order to establish the dictatorship" (332). Rebels like Takasha pretend to be revolutionists only because they want power to establish their dictatorship. By making 'others' believe that they are on the right path of the rebellion, they disguise their motives for power and lead 'others' to work for their desire. Having different strategies to follow, power becomes multi-dimensional.

As defined by Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary and Thesaurus, the term 'Monopolistic' is "having or trying to have complete control of something ... so that others have no share". There are many characters in the novel that strive to get power and there are also characters that use distinct powers to reach the ultimate power. There is always a fight for power between characters either through power or for power. Thereby power becomes a strategy rather than a possession. As Foucault states in his *Power/Knowledge*, "Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or as something which only functions in a form of a chain ... Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organisation ... Individuals are the vehicles of power, not its point of application" (98). Even though the main plot of the story in Anand Neelakantan's *Roll of the Dice* is the combat and challenges between brothers for the kingdom for power, there are also subordinate and marginal characters fighting for power. Individuals act as a vehicle of power. Power is not possessed or controlled by an individual institution. Thus there is always a circulation of power and power acts as a network of relations that spreads throughout the society rather than a mere relation between oppressor and the oppressed.

Works Cited

- Bray, Libba. *The Sweet Far Thing*. Delacorte Press, 2007.
- Burleigh, Anne Husted. Introduction. *John Adams*. Routledge, 2017, p. xi.
- Foucault, Michel. "Two Lectures". *Power / Knowledge: Selected interviews and other writings*. Edited by Gordon Collin, Pantheon Books, 1980.
- Neelakantan, Anand. *Roll of the Dice: Duryodhana's Mahabharata*. Platinum Press, 2018.
- Orwell, George. *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. Planet eBook.