THE KILLER OF PARIKSIT: A POSTHUMAN ENQUIRY

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Abstract

The Mahābhārata opens with layers of frame narratives. The most significant and well-known among these is the story of Parikṣit, Arjuna's grandson, bitten by the Takṣaka Nāga, and the subsequent "Sarpa Satra" of Janamejaya. This paper aims to examine the role of non-human agents in the tale of Parikṣit and Janamejaya, while also establishing a correlation between the principal thread of story telling focusing on the Pandavas with this frame narrative. Who killed Parikṣit is the question this paper aims to answer. Principally looking at the "Sarpa Satra", Takṣaka, and Saramā the mother of canines, the paper aims to explore the undercurrent of ecological entanglement between the Pandavas and their descendants as well as the question of what the role and treatment of the non-human actants is in the sequence of events leading to the "Sarpa Satra". The paper looks at the development of actions and the actants in the narrative of the "Satra" through a posthuman perspective.

Keywords: *Mahābhārata, posthumanism, ecocriticism*

The Killer of Parikṣit: A Posthuman Enquiry

One of the *Mahābhārata*'s most significant frame narratives is the tale of Janamejaya's Sarpa Satra. Arjuna's great grandson Janamejaya performs this Satra as a way of seeking vengeance against his father, Parikṣit's "killer", the Takṣaka Nāga. As the ritual fire drew serpents into its fatal embrace, the tale of the Pandavas and Kauravas was told to those present at this momentous event. Yet the *Mahābhārata* provides spaces for questions, inviting the reader (or listener) to probe at the premises of its characters' actions. Before Parikṣit was killed by Takṣaka, Parikṣit and Janamejaya incurred curses that promised the former's impending untimely death. Even before that, however, Arjuna rendered Takṣaka homeless and decimated his family in the Khāndava Dahana episode of the central story of the *Mahābhārata* (Basu, 1418, pp. 97-99). In a convoluted self-reflexive exercise, the text links its frame narrative to its principal narrative through the tenuous tie of human violence against the non-human world. While the text itself never delves deeper into the implications of Takṣaka's actions against Arjuna's grandson, it positions the tale in a way to force its audience to look beyond Janamejaya's self-righteous justification of the disastrous Satra.

In the act of this enquiry, posthumanism is taken to be broadly concurrent with Bayne's (2018) explanation:

To simplify, posthumanism involves us in making an ontological shift from understanding 'the human' as an individuated entity separate from and observant of the world and its human and nonhuman inhabitants, to one which is inextricably connected to the world and only conceivable as emergent with and through it. (Gourlay, 2021, p. 12)

Bayne divides posthumanism into critical, technological, and ecological posthumanism, writes Gourlay (2021, p. 12). This paper is mainly concerned with the first and last of the three categories.

Critical posthumanism as postulated by Bayne (Gourlay, 2021) looks at Man as part of the socio-political milieu and discursive and material practice (p. 13). It does not imply an absence of human agency, rather a move from unitary to nomadic subjectivity, concept proposed by Braidotti (2013), Gourlay (2021, p. 13) posits. Gourlay (2021, p. 14) sums up Bayne's concept of ecological posthumanism as a paradigm which Focuses on human relationships with the natural world, associated with writers working in 'new materialism', such as Barad (2007), Coole and Frost (2010), and Dolphijn and van der Turin (2012). These theorists, Gourlay writes, are influenced by the philosophical writings of Spinoza, Bergsen, and Deleuze, focusing on the concept of 'new vitalism' (eg., Fraser et al 2005) or 'vital materialism' (Bennett 2010), a perspective which is founded on a 'radical relationality', as Bayne puts it, that '. . . the world is composed only and always through the enfolding and mutual constitution of matter and meaning' (Bayne 2018) (Gourlay, 2021, p.14). This paper aims to look at Parikṣit and Janamejaya in relation to their social and natural environments.

Bruno Latour has demonstrated that there are no special distinct zones of reality called 'science', politics, technology, nature or culture. Everything in the world—natural, artificial, human, animal, fictional--- is equally an actant or an actor. All it takes to be an actant is to have some sort of effect on other actants; the reality principle is impact, with no further distinction or qualification.

In spite of the official obsession with withdrawing goals from "physical" actors, it is, in practice, impossible. Instead of always pointing out the danger of 'anthropomorphizing' natural entities, we should be just as wary of avoiding the oddity of 'phusimorphizing' them, that is, of giving them the shape of objects defined only by their causal antecedents. (Latour, 2014, p. 10)

This paper questions how the non-human actants in this tale only react to the human actants, to which the humans return a response which can arguably be seen as excessive. After all, it is a disproportionate reaction to one's father's death by snake-bite to want to wipe out the entire category of beings falling under the names of "Nāga" and "Sarpa". The possible distinctions between these two categories will not be discussed in this paper, as it is beyond the scope of the research question. The subtle narrative strategy of the epic presents such an incident with little commentary, but much undertone, as will become apparent through a close reading of the incident.

The tale of the *Mahābhārata* is told and retold many times, as the text makes clear from the very onset. The principal narrator of the outermost frame is Souti Ugrasrava (Basu, 1418), who hears it at the Sarpa Satra, as narrated by Vaiśampāyan according to the katha composed by Vyāsa (p.1). When Souti begins to speak on Janamejaya, he recounts a curse incurred by him (Basu, 1418, p. 3). Janamejaya and his brothers were performing a yagna at Kurukshetra, Souti says, when a dog came there (Basu, 1418, p. 3). The brothers beat the dog, and he left crying (Basu, 1418, p. 3).

Hearing her son's complaints, his mother came to Janamejaya's yagnasthala to ask for an explanation (Basu, 1418, p. 3). When Janamejaya failed to provide any, she cursed him to suffer from an unexpected mishap (Basu, 1418, p. 3).

This is the first instance of a non-human agent confronting a human being, and the incident reflects poorly on the latter, even as it emphasizes the agency accorded to Saramā, the mother of the dog in question. Deeply concerned due to this development, Janamejaya, Souti says, appointed a Purohita for śāpamochana, a Purohita born in the womb of a "Sarpi" (Basu, 1418, p. 3). Already, the centrality of the non-human agents is established at this point of the telling.

The tale then shifts to Utanka, a man who comes to Janamejaya with an agenda against Takṣaka (Basu, 1418, p. 6). It is made clear that Utanka's desire for vengeance against Takṣaka has nothing to do with Janamejaya (Basu, 1418, pp. 6-9). Yet he knows exactly how to incite Janamejaya to action. Bringing up Parikṣit's death, Utanka urges Janamejaya to perform a Sarpa Satra to avenge his father (Basu, 1418, pp. 8-9). He brings up Takshak discouraging Kāśyapa Muni from coming to cure Parikṣit (Basu, 1418, p. 8). Yet as the narrative progresses, it is made clear that Kāśyapa Muni left without trying to come to Parikṣit's aid because he saw that the king's death was imminent (Basu, 1418, p. 21). Thus, Utanka's incitement twists reality to justify an act of vengeance that would kill not just Takṣaka, the supposed offender, but every snake on earth. Enraged and provoked, Janamejaya falls for Utanka's fabrications, leading to the Sarpa Satra in question.

Parikṣit himself had incurred a curse while on a hunt (Basu, 1418, p. 20). After hunting down a deer, he asked a Muni observing silence about the whereabouts of the said deer (Basu, 1418, p. 20). When the Muni did not answer him, Parikṣit picked up a dead serpent on an arrow and draped it around the Muni's neck (Basu, 1418, p. 20). The Muni did not react to the enraged king's senseless action (Basu, 1418, p. 20). His son, however, saw the disrespect meted out by the king and cursed him to die of snake bite (Basu, 1418, p. 20). What this incident depicts is the boundless arrogance of the ruler who can at once kill a deer for sport, disrespect a pious man for no graver offense than observing a certain form of penance through remaining silent, and irreverently treat the dead body of a dead snake completely unrelated to the situation at hand. Parikṣit's curse is well-earned, one may say, although the Muni he mocks in anger does not want to condemn the ruler to misfortune (Basu, 1418, p. 20). Thus, he sends a messenger to warn the king, so that the latter can take precautions against such a dire, sudden, untimely death (Basu, 1418, p.20).

Yet Parikṣit does not benefit from the warning, as is clear from the very premise of the story. Why does the word of caution, which comes in ample time, not work? Due to the very hubris which led to the incurring of the curse. The king built a fortress and employed medicinal and occult experts to ensure his safety upon being warned about the danger he is in (Basu, 1418, p. 21). Takṣaka convinces Kāśyapa Muni, a healer able to resuscitate a living being bitten by the former, to not go to save the king (Basu, 1418, p. 21). As mentioned earlier, Kāśyapa chooses not to go to Parikṣit's aid of his own volition, not only because of the cause previously stated (Kāśyapa learning that Parikṣit's death was imminent) but also as Takṣaka offers him more remuneration than Pariksit had offered any potential healer (Basu, 1418,

p. 21). The subsequent events are described quite succinctly by Rajshekhar Basu in his *Mahābhārata* (Basu, 1418, p. 21).

Takṣaka enters Parikṣit's stronghold as a bug hidden among the fruits carried in by Nagas disguised as Tapasvis (Basu, 1418, p. 21). Upon discovering the tiny black-eyed bug, Parikṣit, enboldened by the setting sun, made fun of the possibility of danger descending on him (Basu, 1418, p. 21). He then placed Takṣaka in the form of the bug on his throat, and the latter bit him (Basu, 1418, p. 21).

The crucial point at this juncture is that Parikṣit seems to delight in having evaded a fate he brought upon himself through his own rash actions. However, Janamejaya squarely places the blame of Parikṣit's death on Takṣaka. This, then, is the intricate history of the Sarpa Satra. However, there is still more to be said about the snakes. Souti tells the tale of Āstīka, a man born of the sister of Vasuki Naga and a Muni (Basu, 1418, pp. 18-20). Āstīka was born to save the serpents who did not belong to the group of snakes determined to be 'evil' (Basu, 1418, p. 19). The basis for establishing this distinction is a tale which can be read as the devotion of these snakes to their mother, Kadru. Resorting to a method of jumping from tale to tale followed copiously by the *Mahābhārata* narrative, the tale of Kadru must be stated at this point. Kadru and Vinatā were Kaśyapa's (*not* Kāśyapa) wives (Basu, 1418, p. 13). Kadru's offsprings were the snakes, and Vinatā's child was Garur (Basu, 1418, pp. 13-14), the amphibian creature who goes on to become inextricably linked with the figure of Vishnu. Kadru, in a bid to win Vinatā as her Dasi, makes her children entangle themselves in the tail of Uchhaihśravā (Basu, 1418, p. 15). As a result, the tail appears to be black, Vinatā loses a bet, and becomes Kadru's Dasi (Basu, 1418, pp. 15-16). Significantly, Kadru curses the snakes who refuse to conform to her scheme to be burnt in Janamejaya's Sarpa Satra (Basu, 1418, p. 15). While being cognizant of future events can be an ability among seemingly nonhuman (possibly, even probably, superhuman) characters, this undoes the very basis of Āstīka's role as the saviour of 'good' snakes. The crux of the contradiction evidently lies in the fact that if the snakes who were placed under a curse for not obeying their mother's immoral and unethical instruction are labelled 'evil' by the human characters as well as those closely affiliated with the human world (Vāsuki Nāga and his sister), all moral claims of the human characters become suspect.

The narrative, thus, embeds indications of the possible unreliability of the version of a tale given from a solely human perspective. As a result, the question of the killer of Parikṣit becomes valid. The humans' statements do not amount to conclusive evidence in this matter. This can be a viable route of seeing a posthuman perspective based on non-human versions of canonical events within human history or society. However, a possible counter-argument to this could be the danger of anthropomorphizing non-human characters to a large extent. While this concern might be valid, this paper would like to argue that this is a necessary evil. The anthropomorphic traits ascribed to otherwise non-human characters ensures, in this context, that the danger of what Latour calls 'phusimorphising' has been averted. The non-humans are actants in their own right, and their independent existence overlaps with that of humans at certain points. Each overlap and intersection, it is hinted, can be seen from different perspectives and thus explained in different ways.

The explanations offered by the humans, moreover, rest on thin ice, even as the truth revealed by examining the non-humans' co-existent narrative destabilize established and accepted structures of ethicality in the compendium that is the *Mahābhārata*.

Arran Stibbe writes that humanity is driven by certain stories. These stories claim, among other things, that humans are "not animals" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 4), and that "what makes us human is to be discovered in our differences from other animals rather than our commonalities" (Stibbe, 2015, p. 4). When the tale of the Sarpa Satra is close read and examined, it presents a counter-narrative where not only are the human and non-human worlds inextricably linked with highly porous boundaries, but the human spin on the tale is *less* viable than the non-human one. Significantly, the distinguishing factor between humans and non-humans is often taken to be reason, morality, and ethicality. This reading reveals that the *Mahābhārata* suggests a completely different possibility in one of its opening frames. The unreliability of the human vantage point forces the reader to question the other statements presented as facts throughout the tale, making them assess a claim on its own merit rather than taking someone's word for it.

Parikṣit's death, in conclusion, was not caused by snakebite. The snakebite came at the end of a long chain of events triggered by human misbehaviour. Together, Janamejaya and Parikṣit had accrued three separate curses from different beings due to their misdeeds. The importance of the snakes, from a posthuman perspective, is the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the non-human and opening up the possibility of seeing the entirety of the world as a collective, as 'we' and 'us'. Stibbe (2015) writes, referring to authors like Robert Macfarlane, "[a] direct expression of commonality occurs when the pronouns 'we' places both the author and non-human in the 'participant role'." (p. 116). Finally, it is essential to understand the consequences resulting from the subtle messages embedded in a narrative. Stibbe (2023) writes:

Narrative is not just something that is spoken or read, it is how we understand the world, or rather 'our world'. Our world, in this sense, is our locus of concern, embracing our family, friends, our local environment, other people and places that are salient to us in some way, and stretching into the past as far back as is relevant for us, and as far into the future as we have the imagination to care about. . . . Narrative is, therefore, a means of structuring the world, of ordering the complex flux of the world into a sequence of logically connected events involving a cast of characters and a location. . . . Narratives exist deep in our minds where they can influence how we think, talk and act. (pp. 14-16).

Stibbe (2023) refers to a Native American narrative of creation, pointing out that the power of what he calls 'econarrative' is the "concise, vivid, evocative and memorable" (p. 13) quality of such representations of the displacement of anthropocentrism and "… anthropocentric ideologies of domination, ownership and exploitation of nature" (p. 12). This paper tries to read Parikṣit's death and Janamejaya's Sarpa Satra as instances of powerful econarratives which displace humans from the position of centrality and distribute agency to all beings.

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