



**‘Bhishma’ in Critic’s views: A comparative study of Bhishma portrayed by Irawati Karve and Kuttikrishna Marar.**

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**ABSTRACT**

The Indian epic Mahabharata has influenced the writers in all Indian languages for several centuries. Yugantaby Irawatikarve (Marathi) and Bharataparyatanam by KuttikrishnaMarar (Malayalam) are two such works that illustrates Mahabharata in critic’s perspectives. This paper tries to evaluate the character of Bhishma depicted in these two deliberations of Mahabharata.

**Keywords:** Mahabharata, Yugantha, Bharataparyatanam, Bhishma.

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**INTRODUCTION**

Mahabharata is one of the two epics of the ancient Indian wisdom that influenced most of the Indian Languages. The epic is a narrative of Kurukshetra war and the fate of Kaurava and Pandava princes which consists of over 100,000 slokas and it is the longest poem ever written in any languages of the world.

There are a number of translations and adaptations of Mahabharata in and outside India. It is not a story of the great war of Kurukshetra, but the story of love, lust, power, life, spirituality and many more. It is treated as the fifth Veda in Indian Tradition. Excluding the Divine considerations the characters depicted in Mahabharata are after all human beings with blood and flesh, whom can be considered as the representations of human beings all around us. In this aspect, Mahabharata has got a cultural and sociological relevance in all times.

Mahabharata had been undergone for several types of evaluations and studies based on its varied dimensions. It has been spread among different cultures and language groups in and outside the Indian cultural peninsula based on its comparative and translational values. The present paper tries to evaluate the character of Bhishma depicted in two different criticisms of Mahabharata; Yuganta by Irawatikarve (Marathi) and Bharataparyatanam by Kuttikrishna Marar (Malayalam)

**Kuttikrishna Marar (1900-1973) & Irawati Karve (1905-1970)**

**Kuttikrishna Marar** was born in Kerala on 14 June 1900 and died in 6<sup>th</sup> April, 1973. He was trained at a traditional Sanskrit college and passed the degree of Sahityashiromani. He started his career as Sahityacharya at the Kerala Kalamandalam an institution to train classical arts. For fifteen years he worked there with the poet Vallathol Narayana Menon and published many commentaries of his writings. From 1938 to 1961 he was the proofreader of the Malayalam newspaper, Mathrubhoomi. In 1967, he received 'Sahitya Ratnam' award from Pattambi Sree Neelakanda Sanskrit College and 'Sahityanipunan' award from Thrippunithura Sanskrit College.

His work *Malayaala Sali* is still one of the most authentic treatises on proper Malayalam usage. Another important work of Marar is *Kala Jeevitham Thanne* (Art is Life itself), which won him Kerala Sahitya Academy Award, Kendra Sahitya Academy Award and M.P. Paul Award. *Sahityasallapam*, *Danthagopuram*, *Kaivilakku* (collections of literary criticism) are his important works on literary criticism. In addition to the above, there are more than 19 collections of essays on literary criticism.

Kuttikrishna Marar [1] was courageous enough to question anything that he felt wrong in literary criticism. When everyone adored Anandavardhana, the proponent of Dhvani theory, he criticised him and supported Mahimabhata, a strong opponent of Anandavardhana and the proponent of Anumana theory. He criticised the tendencies of adoration and imitation in literature. *Bharathaparyatanam* (The travel through Mahabharata) the critical study of the Mahabharata, is his well known work. This work is a critical exposition of the characters and main events in the epic Mahabharata. The essays were written in 1949-1950 after the emergence of a new Bharat. *Bharatha Paryatanam* shows his immense

knowledge of the epic, Mahabharata. While appreciating the efforts, C.Narayanamenon in his letter rightly commented the ability of the author to get into the heart of characters of Mahabharata which is generally lacking in scholars who are immersed in controversy and historical criticism.

Though Kuttikrishna Marar was a traditionalist, he was not a conventionalist. He was eager enough to receive the modern thoughts and to assimilate the new ideas from psychology or sociology. He did not hesitate to criticise the contents and characters of Mahabharata. He was greatly influenced by the bedtime stories from Mahabharata said by his mother at his childhood. The influence of mother and his own original unconventional-mind created the critic within him. Later when he wrote Bharataparyatanam, he elaborated his thoughts on philosophical backgrounds. He made it clear with his work that this old epic 'Mahabharata' deals with topics that are of great importance today.

Bharatparyatanam spreads over in nineteen chapters. All these nineteen chapters are dealing with different characters and events, as answers to certain silences and naturally evolving questions in Mahabharata.

**Irawati Karve** was a Marathi writer, an educationist, anthropologist, sociologist and she was born on December 15, 1905 and died on August 11, 1970. After pursuing her bachelor's degree in Philosophy and M.A degree in Sociology, she did doctoral work in Anthropology from the University of Berlin, Germany in 1928-30 under the guidance of Eugene Fischer and then served as the head of the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at Deccan College Post-Graduate and Research Institute, Pune (University of Pune) for forty years till her retirement. She was also head of the Sociology Department at Pune University for a while. Karve was India's first woman Anthropologist at a time when anthropology and sociology were still developing as university disciplines. She was also the founder of Anthropology Department at Poona (now Pune) University, an indologist who mined Sanskrit texts for sociological features and a Marathi writer and essayist.

Irawati was strongly following her beliefs and was an independent thinker. By nature, she was a researcher who preferred to work independently. Her personality was developed through different roles she occupied such as a professor, a researcher, an author and an orator. Being herself and as a wise woman, she had spread her knowledge to the outside world through all these media. She was enthusiastic in her studies, and research. Incidentally she has the reputation of being the first woman two-wheeler driver of Pune in 1952! Her views on women's liberation were very modern. Addressing the women fighting for women's liberation, she said, "Ladies, while fighting with men for rights, why fight for only equal rights? Always fight for more rights".

Yuganta is a collection of essays on Mahabharata. The first Marathi book on Mahabharata read by the author was Pandava Prathapa of Shridhar which was the most common version of Mahabharata in Marathi. Later she made use of the critical edition of Mahabharata and claims that she had presented the data faithfully adhering to the text as printed in the critical edition. She was greatly influenced by her parents, since they knew both the story and the religious teachings and philosophies embodied in Mahabharata and thus her observations of Mahabharata were very different. She is the one who critically analysed Mahabharata in a very secular way. In her criticism of Mahabharata, Irawati Karve presents a delightful approach and scientific in soul and appreciative of the literary tradition of Mahabharata. She is neither creating new interpretations by challenging the usual ones without judging harshly nor venerating blindly but, presents strong observations with conviction.

For Irawati Karve [2], Mahabharata embodies 1. A historical core 2. An exquisite narration where one becomes aware of the full strength, brevity and beauty of the Sanskrit language, 3. An aesthetic experience, 4. A representative and fascinating picture of an epic and 5. an ever present reminder of what life means.

Yugantha evaluates the mythical heroic figures of Mahabharata from historical, anthropological and secular perspectives. The usually defied characters of this epic are here subjected to a rational enquiry that places them on context, unravels their hopes and fears and imbues them with wholly human motives, thereby making their stories relevant and astonishing to contemporary readers. The text consists of nine chapters in which the character of Bhishma is critically depicted in the second chapter; 'The final effort'

### **Bhishma in Marar's view**

Kuttikrishna Marar depicts Bhishma as a very strong hearted man; the man of firm decisions. In his point of view, Bhishma is treated as one of the main pillars of Mahabharata. Marar named the first chapter of Bharataparyatanam as 'Bhishma Prathijnja' which means 'The vow of Bhishma'. From this title itself it is very clear that Marar pays special attention to the 'vow' taken by Bhishma. In this chapter he narrates the story of Devavratha, from his birth to all the karmas he followed till his death. Bhishma was originally named as Devavratha, the son of Ganga and Santhanu. But later on his firm and courageous oath, he was called as Bhishma the man who took the terrible / great oath. Here Marar says that we, the readers or the normal being could accept him as Bhishma only when we realised that, he is quite rigid

in his oath even after the death Vichitraveera, but the Devas did know this at the very first time, when Devavrata took the vow in front of the fishermen and they showered flowers from heaven.

Marar critically evaluates the oath taken by Bhishma. In his observation Bhishma was a genuine son, keeping his words for his father that he will never be the king nor will marry. Then he successfully managed the role of a step son, taking care of his young step mother and her children Chitrangada and Vichitraveera. Later when they died he was persuaded to break his vow and marry the wives of them by her step mother. But he refused. Then Satyvatinsisted Vyasa to be the man for the wives, for the continuation of the Purudynasty, Bhishma continued to be the caretaker of the dynasty; For Pandavas and Kauravas, Bhishma was not merely the care taker, but he played the role of an efficient father, teacher, and trainer for them. Since Duryodhana was the king, in the war of Kurukshetra, he stood with the Kauravas as the army general, just by obeying the rules of the Ruler. Marar emphasises on this point that, in all these acts of life, Bhishma was firm in his oath without any failure in it.

Certain observations of Marar about Bhishma, as a person of 'terrible vow' are interesting. He argues that it was not the devotion of Bhishma to his father made him keep his promises, but the will he had and his capability to make strong decisions. He puts forward this philosophy; we must be strong enough to keep our promises at any cost, like Bhishma who sacrificed his entire life to keep his words.

### **Bhishma in Karve's view**

Irawati Karve observes Bhishma as a 'cursed being' rather than 'the doer of difficult deeds'. In the beginning of the second chapter of Yuganta, she says that while reading Bhishmaparva in Mahabharata, we become convinced that the text is not so much of the beginning of the Kurukshetra war, but Bhishma's last great effort to stop it. She then puts forward a question, regarding the firm decisions of Bhishma as "Why should he, who had given up everything that was his by right, have in his extreme old age accepted the generalship of the Kaurava army?" This is how she treats Bhishma in her book. She questions every 'difficult deed' of Bhishma in a very critical way.

The life of Bhishma was full of apparent contradictions. But Karve finds certain logics to justify them. She magnifies the point that 'Bhishma is a cursed being'. Bhishma was born as a cursed being (rebirth of Dyava, One among the Ashtavasus). All the other seven Vasus were freed from earth at the time of their death itself, but Dyava alone was not. And has trapped on earth to live as a cursed being, avoiding all the earthly pleasures. Karve justifies the terrible vows of Bhishma as the part of this curse rather than his greatness. Later his father Santhanu had given him a boon, 'to die at his will'. Irawati says he could have used that boon to free himself from earth, but he didn't.

Irawati compares Bhishma's sacrifices with Puru, an ancient prince of the same line, who had offered his youth to his father. Puru was returned with the Kingdom as its reward but Bhishma on the other hand got nothing, but death at his will. He sacrificed the Kingdom, the power, and marriage. Unburdened by Kingdom and marriage, endowed by the power to die at will, Bhishma was free to leave the world. But, destiny born with Bhishma casted him back to the fetters. The bachelor who had no children of his own; but spend his whole life in caring for the children and grand children of his family, till his last moment.

Irawati also points out that how Bhishma was cursed by the women around him. She says "in his zeal to perpetuate his house he had humiliated and disgraced the royal women. Karve observes that Bhishma was never conscious about the women's concerns nor he could never observe things from the women's perspectives. That is how he treated Amba, who was forcefully brought for his brothers. The widows of Vichitraveera who were forcefully made to mate with Vyasa. Gandhari, who were forcefully married to the blind Dritharashtra and the Kunti and Madri to 'albino' Pandu. Madri who was burned herself at the funeral pyre of her husband at a very young age, Draupadi was humiliated in the royal court. Karve observes that in the first few cases the mistake he did was regarding the selection of brides for the perpetuation of the Kuru line where as his indifferent deed in the royal court towards Draupadi was totally inhuman.

She observes that Mahabharata does not show any chivalry towards women. She says Bhishma did all this cruelty not deliberately but his indifference arise due to his obsession with one goal- the perpetuation of the Kuru line, he had sacrificed completely. She emerges with certain questions like, whether Mahabharata wants to emphasise that human life, whether live for oneself or spend in unselfish endeavour must inevitably result in wrong to others.

Irawati concludes with a question whether Bhishma had accomplished anything in keeping his vows. The deeds of Bhishma are still justified with a statement that since he has publically assumed his difficult role and unnecessarily undertaken great responsibilities, he had to pay his part to the end.

### **Comparison of the two views**

Nineteenth century witnessed the bipolar cultural world and established the East-West dichotomy. This was perceived the contrasting cultures of Asia and Europe and a product of colonial cultural history. The East- West division was emphasized on religious and cultural differences articulated by the western scholars. They showed keen interest to study the eastern religious and philosophical texts to know the distinction between European Christendom and the cultures beyond it to the East. Sir William Jones of the Royal Asiatic society and the chief Justice of Calcutta High court set the tone for the new endeavour. Max Muller, Monier Williams and many other scholars studied the religious and philosophical texts and acknowledged the wisdom of the East. These Indologists studied the east and interpreted through the eyes of the west. They defined Hinduism as a spiritual religion, Buddhism as the path of liberation and so as other religions and their commentaries were accepted by the scholars of the East and West. The English educated Indian youth of the latter half of the Nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century were influence by the western Indologists and their discourses on the east.

Bharataparyatanam and Yuganta are the best example of the east west dichotomy. Both the works are approaching the Mahabharata according to their orientations. Marar studied the text through the eyes of the east and IrawatiKarve through the eyes of the west. Marar writes Bharataparyatanam in 1950 where IrawatiKarve in 1968 [2]. Both the writers were greatly influenced by their family, especially their mothers, in critically evaluating and questioning the stories logically. Marar was a literary critic where as Karve was an anthropologist. The evaluations made by Kuttikrishna Marar is mainly on his philosophical and logical views where as Irawati's views are all historical, anthropological and feministic.

Marar considers Bhishma as a man of great soul and an inimitable character with a firm will. He justifies Bhishma for all his deeds on behalf of his selflessness. In Marar's view Bhishma is a great person, a leader and model for every human being. He teaches the lesson to take firm decisions and reminds the importance to keep one's word at any cost. He observes Bhishma as a man who stood firm for *Dharma*, and as a person who never been attracted to the physical attractions of the world. In his observation each action of his life, one after the other, was just to keep him unaltered to the very first oath taken for his father. Marar says, "it is not his devotion to his father but, his will and courage made him the man of terrible vow". Marar even justifies Bhishma for his passive behaviour at the court where Droupati got insulted by the Kouravas. He says Bhishma was following the *dharma* just by obeying to the King.

On other hand, IrawatiKarve considers Bhishma as a cursed being. She even questions his birth for which he was not at all responsible. She attributed the same to his earlier birth. According to her, Bhishma's life was full of contradictions. She criticised Bhishma for his consent to Vyasa because he was afraid of jeopardizing the authority, if someone else from the Kuru family was asked to do so. Actually he was obeying the instructions of his step mother Satyawati. She blames him for accepting the general ship of Kaurava army, at the end of his life, since he was a person refusing every honour on behalf of his oath. She finds him as a man who is not fit for war. In her views, Duryodana offered Bhishma the general ship of his army just for a formality, thinking that he would refuse this too as usual. Duryodana wanted Karna to take the leadership of his army.

Irawati, as Feminist critic observes Bhishma as a man who was not found of any women and reason for the sufferings of every women from Amba to Draupati. She observes that, Bhishma was discussing what was *dharma* and what was not *dharma*, while Droupati was insulted by the Kauravas. He had the authority to stop the shameful humiliation to a woman in view of the public audience. In Karve's point of view similar was the case regarding Amba, Ambika, Ambalika, Gandhari, Kunti and Madri. Bhishma, without considering the feeling of any of them, forced them to follow his decisions to justify his terrible oath. Even though he was a strong hearted man, with selfless esteems, he could not be right, in Karve's views. He was yearning curses upon curses, with not necessary justifications. Finally IrawatiKarve posed a question, that whether Bhishma had accomplished anything in keeping his views.

## CONCLUSION

The great Indian epic Mahabharata has the major role in inspiring writers in every Indian languages. It has paved the way for comparative literature in Indianism. The many narrations and creative adaptations of Mahabharata are examples of this. Other than its spiritual context, the other elements like the culture, civilisation, aesthetics ect. are also been subjects of new narrations. Both the texts exhibit their uniqueness in content and presentation. Even though there are similarities, the character of Bhishma presented in both this works with many differences. Marar considers Bhishma as great personality and a selfless man of difficult deeds and firm decisions. His observations are rooted over certain philosophical and cultural values. Karve represents Bhishma as a character of total failure, cursed, and states that his deeds are fruitless. Her observations are basically rooted over her historical and anthropological backgrounds with some sort of feministic views.

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