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CIRCULATING VYASA'S MAHABHARATA AS WORLD LITERATURE

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Abstract: This study explores how the *Mahabharata* has circulated globally through mechanisms such as translation, adaptation, canonization, and scholarly criticism. Drawing on qualitative research methods, this study examines the primary text of the *Mahabharata* and secondary data from academic journals, books, and critical theories. It highlights the role of translation in preserving the text's cultural essence while navigating political and ideological challenges, particularly during British colonial rule. Adaptations of the *Mahabharata*, including its influence on Indonesian *Wayang Kulit* and Peter Brook's international theater production, demonstrate the complex process of transforming the epic to suit diverse cultural contexts. The paper also addresses feminist readings of the epic, focusing on the representation of Draupadi, and how modern adaptations challenge traditional portrayals. By analyzing these mechanisms, this study reveals how the *Mahabharata* has been canonized, critiqued, and integrated into global literary discourse, affirming its enduring relevance and universal appeal.

Keywords: Mahabharata, World Literature, David Damrosh

INTRODUCTION

The concept of World Literature has evolved over time, encompassing literary works that transcend their cultural boundaries and reach international audiences. David Damrosh defines it as a “mode of

circulation and of reading,” suggesting that for a national or local work to be recognized as part of world literature, it must circulate beyond its home base and be accessible to readers worldwide. This idea, first introduced by Johann Wolfgang von Goethe in the

early 19th century, emphasizes the global movement of literary works, whether through translation or adaptation. Literature is not static; it adapts, evolves, and takes on new meanings as it moves across cultural and linguistic lines.

In this context, mechanisms like translation, adaptation, canonization, and scholarly criticism play crucial roles in the circulation of literature across the globe. Through translation, national works can be reinterpreted and shared in different cultural settings, allowing them to maintain their essence while engaging with new audiences. However, this process is not without its complexities, as translation can also be influenced by political or cultural biases. Similarly, adaptations in various media, such as film, theater, and television—bring literary works into new contexts, sometimes altering their meaning to suit the preferences of different audiences.

The epic *Mahabharata*, written by Vyasa, is a prime example of a literary work that has transcended its origins, becoming a significant part of world literature. Through translation, adaptation, and critical scholarship, the

Mahabharata has found its way into various cultures and academic settings, continuing to resonate with readers around the world. In this paper, we will explore how Vyasa's *Mahabharata* has been integrated into world literature through these mechanisms, with a focus on its global circulation and interpretation in diverse cultural contexts.

METHOD

This study employed qualitative research method. This study aimed at exploring how Vyasa's *Mahabharata* has become a part of world literature through mechanisms such as translation, adaptation, canonization, and scholarly criticism. The research employs both primary and secondary sources to address the evolution of the *Mahabharata* as it circulates beyond its cultural origin and engages with global audiences. The primary source for this study is the *Mahabharata* itself, specifically Vyasa's original work. Translations, adaptations, and critical interpretations of the epic in different linguistic and cultural contexts are analyzed to understand its transformation as it moves across

borders. The Secondary sources consist of academic journals, books, and scholarly articles that discuss the concept of world literature, the mechanisms of literary circulation, and the significance of translation and adaptation in making national texts part of global literature.

FINDINGS

Conceptualizing World Literature

According to David Damrosch, world literature is “a mode of circulation and of reading” (2003). In order local and national literature to be part of world literature, they must actively circulate beyond their origin or home base, so it can be easily accessed by International readers.

The idea of world literature can usefully continue to mean a subset of the plenum of literature. I take world literature to encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language. In its most expansive sense, world literature could include any

work that has ever reached beyond its home base.... a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture (Damrosch, 4).

Historically, the term world literature was introduced by German author named Johann Wolfgang von Goethe as *Weltliteratur*, another word for world literature, when he was speaking to his young disciple Johann Peter Eckermann in January 1827 (Damrosch, 1). His major contributions to the world literature were his writings a novella and translations. He said to Eckermann that after he read and analyzed Chinese novel, he thought that Chinese literature was somehow similar to Western literature in terms of their way of thinking, acting, and feeling.

Dined with Goethe. “Within the last few days, since I saw you,” said he, “I have read many things; especially a Chinese novel, which occupies me still

and seems to me very remarkable.”

“Chinese novel!” said I; “that must look strange enough.”

“Not so much as you might think,” said Goethe; “the Chinese think, act, and feel is almost exactly like us; and we soon find that we are perfectly like them, except that all they do is more clear, pure, and decorous, than with us.

“With them all is orderly, citizen-like, without great passion or poetic flight; and there is a strong resemblance to my *Hermann and Dorothea*, as well as to the English novels of Richardson” (Damrosh, 11).

There are some mechanisms in circulating local or national literature into world literature, which are translation, adaptation, canonization and scholar criticism. First, translation, Qingben Li and Jinghua Guo analyze how to make national Chinese literature become part of world literature through translation and cross-cultural interpretation because translation is not only the process of converting the source language but

also the culture into target language.

They said, “If Chinese literature wants to be read abroad and in other cultural surroundings, it needs to be understood and recognized in different contexts, while still retaining the representation of its own intrinsic value and valuation” (Li, 2013). However, translation is used by colonizer to manipulate the truth of the third world in order to legitimate their mission in colonizing them, like what happen in India.

According to Datta G. Sawant, with the rise of modern Indian languages, the cultural Sanskrit texts began to be translated into modern Indian languages, like Assamese, Marathi, Kannada, Bengali and many others, in order to preserve that text (2012). However, when India encountered with the West (British colony) in the late eighteen and nineteen centuries, it resulted a harm and benefit for India. It created a harm to India due the fact that British translation were determined by the orientalist thinking or ideology and used it as a tool to grasp, define, categorize and control India by creating their own India through

translating Indian literature (Sawant, 2012). Responding to this situation, Indian nationalist writers used translation as a resistance against British domination and as an expression of their cultural identity. For example, Raja Rammohan Roy's translations of Shankara's *Vedanta* and it was followed by R.C. Dutt's translations of *Rig-Veda, the Upanishads, Ramayana, Mahabharata* and few classical Sanskrit plays. These translations were meant to challenge "the romantic and utilitarian notions of Indian as submissive and indolent" (Sawant, 2012). Although translation was misused by British colony, translation brought good impact toward Indian literature, for example Tagor translation on his *Gitanjali* into English won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913.

Second, adaptation, it is a film or movie, book or play that is based on a particular piece of work but that has been changed for new situation (Oxford, 2005). In the process of adaptation, the writer should adjust the source text to the market, audience and culture which it is adapted.

Therefore, domesticating character, setting, tradition, and culture is needed in order to make the target audience can be familiar with it. The problem with adaptation is that the disappointment with the screen adaptation tends to make the audiences prefer literature over film. Robert Stam elaborates that there are several factors why the audience prefer literature over film, they are class prejudice, iconophobia (suspicion of the visual), logophilia (a belief in the primacy of the written word), and anti-corporeality (distaste for the ways in which the medium of cinema engages with the body of the spectator) (Brokeshrine, 2018).

Third, canonization and scholar criticism, canon originally comes from the ancient Greek word, 'kanon' which means 'scale', used to refer the content in the bible, later on, the term canon refers to the talented and original creative works regarded by authoritative expert (Ping Li, 2014). When a local or national literature has already become canon, it will be learnt in the school, so that it can open any criticism from scholars not only from

home base but also International sphere. Therefore, it will give chance for the local or national canon literature becomes world literature. Wolfreys and Robin's argument is strengthened by Chen arguing that canon should include at least following,

Firstly, literary canons should be selected by the authority and be in common use by the common people. Secondly, literary canons should be the outstanding works which are worth reading a hundred times and there will be new artistic charm whenever they are read. Thirdly, literary canons can transcend ethnic and national boundaries to produce a worldwide impact. Fourthly, literary canons refer to the works which can withstand the test of time. Fifthly, literary canons are immoral because of the circulation of the interpretations and re-interpretations of the works (Ping Li, 2014).

It can be concluded that translation, adaptation, canonization and scholar criticism are the

mechanism in circulating local and national literature into world literature because it will open the access for local and national literature to be consumed globally. Although the readers cannot neglect the fact that there are some manipulations in circulation process because of not only the content which is translated and adapted but also the translator's political or economic ideology, or the publishing industry interest. However, Peter Nilson argues that there are some possibilities for local and national literature to be rejected when they travel across, such as it is written in a marginal language which loses in translation, or it is set in a specific cultural context which readers find difficult to relate to (2014).

Circulating Vyasa's *Mahabharata* as World Literature

Mahabharata is an Indian epic, written by Vyasa around 300 BCE, consisting of over 100,000 verses. It tells about a sibling rivalry, between Pandawa and Kurawa, who join Kurusksheta War for the throne of Hasthinapura. The depiction of human struggle, universal philosophy of life,

and its moral values makes this epic is well accepted by society around the world. In the past *Mahabharata* circulated through the kings, wealthy patrons, and the monks from temple to temple in effort to expand the lands and spread Hinduism to the corner of the world. Now with the canonization of Vyasa's *Mahabharata*, it can be studied in many schools and universities. Garini said that in Creighton University for instance, Ancient India becomes one of the content of world literature, The *Mahabharata* together with China's *Analects* and Mexico's *Cantares Mexicanos*, Aztec songs and poetry are studied by students.

With the rise of modern Indian languages and translation's development, Vyasa's *Mahabharata* has been translated and rewritten into all local Indian languages, English and other languages.

Kabi Sanjay translated it into Bengali for a rural readership (15th century) and Ezhuthachchan wrote the *Mahabharatam kilippattu* in Malayalam (15th century).

Sarala Das in Oriya (15th century), Nannayya, Tikanna and Yerrana in Telugu (11th, 13th, and 14th centuries respectively), Pampa in Kannada (10th century) are a few other examples. Most of them added stories of their own, while doing away with some. Sarala Das edited out the "Bhishma Parva" completely, with the result that his version does not have the *Bhagavad Gita*. Adharvana's Telugu *Bharatamu* (12th century) was a Jain version of the epic.

In Indonesia for example, the narrative of *Mahabharta* is found in the *Wayang Kulit* or traditional puppet shadow from Indonesia performance, but the story according to Indrajit Bandyopdhyay is taken from Indonesian text *Kakawin Bharatayuddha* which is an old Javanese poetical consisting of some parvas of the epic written by Mpu Sedah and Mpu Panuluh in Indian meter or *Kakawin* (Bandyopdhyay, 2007). In western world, Peter Brook as an English theatre and film director

is also interested to adapt and perform the *Mahabharata* outside of India through theater performance.

The *Mahabharata* was Brook's eleven-hour stage adaptation of the massive, epic cornerstone of Hindu literature, religion and culture, originally produced in French in 1985 and performed in English. The Harvey. The production dramatized the epic's main storyline - the tale of an ancient, high-cast dynastic conflict involving two opposed camps of cousins, the Pandavas ("sons of light") and the Kauravas ("sons of darkness") (2010).

The audiences praise the staging of *Mahabharata* during his International tour is the evidence that the audiences are interested in this epic. However, in New York, Brook encounters skepticism; some audiences condemn his work as Orientalist thinking and cultural piracy. In responding audiences' condemnation, Brook defends his decision in interpreting the epic in order to make western audience can be familiar with it. Because he believes

that *Mahabharata* should belong to everyone, therefore, he transforms Hindu myth into universalized art, accessible to any culture.

Here is a work that doesn't belong to India. It is a great heritage of India, but it has meaning for others. They can do their *Mahabharata* in their way better than anyone, as we can do our Shakespeare in our way better than anyone. But these works have a meaning not for Indians, or for white people, but for this being called Man. The *Mahabharata* belongs to mankind (2010).

Although the epic focuses on the rivalry among the family members, it also introduces social issues, such as the representation of women in Indian and Hindu culture, like Draupadi, a female character who undergoes a dynamic role for women that becomes the main interest for feminist criticism. According to Pradip Bhattacharya, Draupadi is the suitable representation of the resistance against male domination due to the fact that her birth is the results from his father's sacrificial rite in order to defeat his evil

enemy, Drona (Bhattacharya, 2004). With the power of God, she appears from the flames after the first-born son, Dhristyadhyumna. In her birth, God announces that she will cause the destruction for all Kshatriyas.

Draupadi's emergence is an unintended bonus for Drupada who performed the rite for obtaining a son to kill Drona. Her birth is accompanied by a skiey heavenly announcement that this dark (hence, one of her name is *Krishnaa*) lady will destroy all Kshatriyas (Bhattacharya, 2004).

In the middle of the story, I think she is trapped under patriarchy by portraying Draupadi as a beautiful and desirable woman who can attract men's interest to win her heart through a contest set her father.

This required almost superhuman strength and skill, and Drupada proclaimed that the hero who would win his daughter should perform this feat.... Fresh from her auspicious bridal bath, and clad in flowing silk Draupadi dismounted and

entered the swayamvara hall, seeming to fill it with the sweetness of her presence and perfect beauty (C. Rajagopalachari. 2003).

By making a contest in order to win Draupadi, she has already been associated with an object or commodity that can be changed and sold. This is how patriarchy starts to spread their values saying that woman is only a passive and powerless object. Her representation as an object of patriarchy is worsened when her first husband, Yudhishtira, pawns her in the game of dice.

Prathikami went to Draupadi as ordered by his master. He said to her: "O revered princess, Yudhishtira fell under the spell of the game of dice and has wagered and lost even you. Now you belong to Duryodhana. I have come by Duryodhana's command to take you to serve in his household as maid servant, which will hereafter be your office. Then he told her the whole story of how Yudhishtira had lost all his wealth and had

finally betted her, after having first forfeited his brothers and himself (C. Rajagopalachari, 2003).

At the very beginning, when Yudhisthira was a free man, he forfeited all he possessed and that, of course, included Draupadi. Hence, Draupadi had already come into Sakuni's possession. There is nothing more to be said in the matter. Even the clothes they have on are now Sakuni's property (C. Rajagopalachari, 2003).

Besides, she is depicted as an object; she is also portrayed as a dutiful wife. When her husband loses her in the game of dice, she should be stripped naked. In this moment, she accepts it without any rejection. The only thing that she can do is she is powerlessly prays to divine Krishnaa in order to seek for his salvation.

"O Duhsasana, seize the garments of the Pandacasa and the robes of Draupadi and hand them over to Sakuni." Seeing this, Duhsasana went to Draupadi and made ready to seize her clothes by force. All

earthly aid had failed, and in the anguish of utter helplessness, she implored divine mercy and succor: "O Lord of the World," she wailed, "God whom I adore and trust, abandon me not in this dire plight. You are my sole refuge. Protect me." And she fainted away (C. Rajagopalachari, 2003)

Finally, she is rescued by the divine Krishnaa. This is the proof how patriarchal values in believing that woman should be passive and obedient are internalized in Draupadi's attitude. Even if she has a big power that can destroy Kshatriya, without men's intervention, she is useless and powerless.

Then, as the wicked Duhsasana started his shameful work of pulling at Panchali's robes and good men shuddered and averted their eyes, even then, in the mercy of God a miracle occurred: In vain Duhsasana toiled to strip off her garments, for as he pulled off each, ever fresh garments were seen to clothe her body, and soon a great heap of resplendent

clothes was piled up before the assembly till Duhsasana desisted and sat down in sheer fatigue (C. Rajagopalachari, 2003)

Therefore, Mahasweta Devi or A Bengali writer and activist focuses on women's rights and empowering tribal people. challenges Draupadi's hidden depictions in *Mahabharata* by rewriting "Draupadi" translated by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and intentionally constructing her main protagonist, Draupadi or Dopdi Mejhen, as a strong, brave, and independent Bengali woman in order to make the oppressors come to their self-reflection upon their oppressive and injustice treatment done to them. In this case, Devi is interested to rewrite the scene of Draupadi's praying to divine Krishnaa when her dress wants to be stripped naked by Duhsasana by analogizing it with Dopdi's rape case. Devi never lets Dopdi Mejhen to be weak after she is being raped by the officers because she wants to show Dopdi's inner strength to resist through the act of rape. Therefore, when she is raped by the

officers, she never asks divine power, like Krishnaa to rescue her, but she chooses to resist it by herself by walking nakedly and pushing Senanayak with her two mangled breasts.

Draupadi fixes her red eyes on the tent. Says, Come, I'll go. The guard pushes the water pot forward. Draupadi stands up. She pours the water down on the ground. The commotion is as if the alarm had sounded in a prison. Senanayak walks out surprised and sees Draupadi, naked, walking to-ward him in the bright sunlight with her head high. The nervous guards trail behind (Spivak, 2002).

CONCLUSION

Vyasa's *Mahabharata* is an ancient Indian epic reflecting human struggle, universal philosophy of life and its moral values that makes this epic is well accepted by society around the world. In order to transform *Mahabharata* into world literature, some mechanisms are used, such as translation, adaptation,

canonization and scholar criticism. The study finds out that Vyasa's *Mahabharata* has been translated into both Indian modern language and English, for example by Romesh Chunder Dutt, Indian writer and translator of Vyasa's *Mahabharata* into English. In terms of adaptation, it has already been adapted into *Wayang Kulit* in Indonesia and theater performance by Peter Brook although it creates controversy in western society. By canonizing Vyasa's *Mahabharata* it is not only learnt but also criticized by scholars, for instance through feminism.

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