Tweeting the Epics: Adapting the Mahabharata for Tweet Fiction[i]

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Abstract

In the vast literary landscape of emerging genres of literature, the broad umbrella term 'flash fiction' refers to very short stories, told in a few words. Tweet fiction is an emerging genre of very short, short story told in the form of tweets which are composed in a maximum of 140 characters. Given that the *Mahabharata* is considered to be India's longest epic, it is interesting to see as to how 21st century writers are adapting the epic for the generation next readers, who have a short attention span. This explorative paper examines as to how *The Mahabharata* has been retold to shape the contours of digital storytelling in the form of twitter fiction or 'twiction'. The first part elaborates on the features of tweet fiction, the second part analyses Devdutt Pattanaik's tweet version of the epic. In the final analysis, tweet fiction is not only a suitable genre for the digital generation but also generates the interest of the youth in ancient epics.

Key Words: Devdutt Pattnaik, epic, Indian literature, Mahabharata, twiction

Social media has emerged as a platform for new genres of literatures like flash fiction and tweet or twitter fiction. These are consumed by the active and social media-addictive Generation Y learners (also digital natives and net generation) whose unique characteristics include their inter-connectedness and innovative 'peer-to-peer relationships'[ii]. This paper attempts a brief examination of how the Indian epic *Mahabharata* has been retold to shape the contours of digital storytelling in the form of twitter fiction. Three Indian writers Chindu Sreedharan, Meghna Pant and Devdutt Pattanaik took to the 21st century medium of twitter to retell the *Mahabharata* which, according to general consensus, is a war story about the Kaurava dynasty and part of an Indian's cultural consciousness. The aim is to undertake a close analysis of Pattanik's version and at the same time briefly mention Sreedharan's and Pant's versions. Whereas the first part elaborates on the key traits of the form of tweet fiction or twiction, the second part dwells on the obvious reasons which compel Indian writers to revisit the *Mahabharata*. This is followed by a close reading of Pattanaik's 36 tweets based on the compiled version[iii]. First, let us understand as to what is twitter.

Twitter is a 'microblogging' or social networking site represented by 'the iconic blue cartoon bird' with which users 'publish updates' or tweets with a maximum of 140 characters – "spaces and symbols" and exert their influence in varied fields. (Belew, 2014: 162-163) Tweets can include photos, videos and links. Its popularity turned it into a fertile ground for the emergence of the concept of twitter literature and the

envisioning of #TwitterFiction festival[iv]. Whereas the broad umbrella term 'flash fiction' refers to short stories told in a few words, twitter fiction is the current and popular genre of very short, short story told in the form of tweets. It goes under varied names - tweet fiction, twiction, twitter fiction or twitterature and this paper uses the terms interchangeably.

Three hallmark characteristics of twiction are a maximum of 140 characters, the use of the present tense with a view to capturing the 'now' moments and its fragmentary nature. The first trait calls for brevity. An exemplary prototype of such fiction can be traced back to Ernest Hemingway's short story, a masterpiece of six words: "For Sale: baby shoes. Never worn." The emphasis on the 'now' trait enables participation of the followers. The fragmentary trait renders it appealing to the current digital natives with a short attention span. According to Rudin (2011), twitterature's form has three goals. First, as a 'marketing vehicle', it accelerates the reputation of established writers. Second, as 'a revealing platform', it helps unknown authors to achieve fame. Finally, its 'bite-sized form' appeals to today's generation and the narrative, in the form of tweets, is followed by the readers via twitter, mostly on their mobile screens. For Rudin, the art of ephemeral tweets enables authors to widen their reader-base and 'entice readers who see art in character-counts as well as characters'. Before the close reading of the epic twiction, an overview of twitter terminology will help in comprehending the conventions of twitter[v].

One must become a registered user and choose a Twitter handle i.e. @username,

which is displayed while tweeting. The tweets are displayed on one's homepage and one's twitter stream includes tweets published by everyone that one follows as well as the updates. For example, a person called Unique Identity may be on your account but his twitter handle can be @novice or @UniqueIdentity. Other conventions are: follow, unfollow, block, reply, who to (twitter's suggestions), the star symbol (like or favourite), RT or retweet – sharing the tweet with others in one's network - indicated by a small arrow icon, mentions and # hashtags for categorizing tweets and attracting attention to an important phrase or keyword for assistance in tracking or searching.

Tweets are public but authors can use DM or direct message function in front of the twitter handle to contact followers. The function helps the author to reach out and influence readers/target audience, without being a 'friend' or without being 'connected'. It is used as a promotional strategy by the publishing industry which capitalizes on the author-reader numbers or followers to boost book-sales. What are the limitations of tweeting in literature? Tweets can be difficult to find unless 'sequenced by an external site such as Storify[vi]' and if novels show the workings of the world, twitter fiction shows the workings of twitter "hashtags and all"(Franklin, 2014). Let us understand some features of the *Mahabharata[vii]* and reflect on the rationale for the turn to the epic, the dilemmas faced by the writers and the manner in which they adapt the epic to fit the conventions of tweet fiction.

The Great Epic of the Bharata Dynasty, the repository of moral laws and *itihasa* or 'that's what happened', proclaims Wendy Doniger (2017), comprises 10,000 couplets 'about seven times the length of *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* combined - divided into 18 parvans or sections, plus a supplement titled *Harivamsha* (Genealogy of the God Hari/Vishnu)' and deals with the conflict between the Pandavas and Kauravas for dynastic supremacy. Indian writers turn to it both as a decolonizing tool as well as to reinterpret it anew for contemporary (global) readers. As folklore scholar A.K. Ramanujan maintains, "No one ever reads the *Mahabharata* for the first time" for it is "not a text but a tradition [oral]" learnt "in bits and pieces that fit together"(1999:161-163). Let us briefly look at how the three Indian writers have handled the content versus form dichotomy while adapting the epic to the 21st century medium like twitter with its limited canvas.

Sreedharan attempted the first twitter fiction based on the *Mahabharata*; departing from other interpretations and Vyasa's version, Sreedharan's retelling revolves around the Pandava Bhima's perspective and Bhima's love for his first wife Hidimba[viii]. Sreedharan admits to being influenced by Prem Panicker's *Bhimsen*, based on M.T. Vasudevan Nair's novel *Randamoozham* (told from Bhima's perspective) and additionally Bhyrappa's *Parva*, Chitra Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions*, Shashi Tharoor's *The Great Indian Novel* and the reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata* by R. K. Narayan, Ramesh Menon and C. Rajagopalachari. He first posted it on twitter as @epicretold, and Penguin Publishers published the same in the form of a book. *Epic Retold* comprises 40 episodes and the story was told in nearly 2,700 tweets over 1065 days[ix]. He microblogged the epic for his British colleagues and was interested in Indian responses too and has promised to create another but shorter version from Duryodana's perspective[x]. Sreedharan's trajectory is from fiction on twitter over a long period of time to a printed version. It proves how participating twitter followers and fans can help writers to get a book contract and glory and how media attention can play a significant role in publication and sales.

While Sreedharan's version is spread over four years, Pant's retelling is spread over four days. Exploring the 'narrative potential of Twitter' for retelling the *Mahabharata* for the global audiences in 100 tweets i.e. 25 tweets over a period of four days during the Twitter Fiction Festival (12-16 March 2014), Pant invited reader's opinion regarding the subsequent sub-plots and asserts that tweeting is 'reactionary and spontaneous, calling for invested moments than planning'[xi]. Strategically choosing to concentrate on the births of the epic characters, their exile, war preparations and the Kurukshetra war, she included the Gita as requested by her followers; disregarding the criticism regarding the dilution of the epic due to the medium, she had to do away with many sub-plots in view of the limited canvas of twitter[xii]. Both Pant and Pattanaik tweeted their intention to retell the epic in 100 and 36 tweets, respectively[xiii]. Undoubtedly, a lot of introspection and artistic choices and struggles must have been involved in this herculean venture of

transforming a huge epic into a miniature tweet version. A follower has given an overview of the popularity of Pant's version[xiv].

Pattanaik who has published a book entitled *Jaya: An Illustrated Retelling of the Mahabharata* (2010) took about 40 minutes (the time period can be tracked from the tweets) to retell the *Mahabharata* in 36 tweets. In contrast to Sreedharan's creative journey from tweets to a book, Pattanik's creative pursuit in adapting the epic is a reverse journey i.e. a book to tweets. In comparison to the four part structure of Pant's 100 tweets, Pattanaik condenses the epic further and follows the structure of the epic itself i.e. 2 tweets per chapter of the 18 chapters of the epic. Since tweets tend to disappear and are difficult to track, this paper refers to the compilation[xv] of Pattanaik's tweets for a close analysis. Given below is a screen-shot of Pattanaik's first tweet[xvi]:
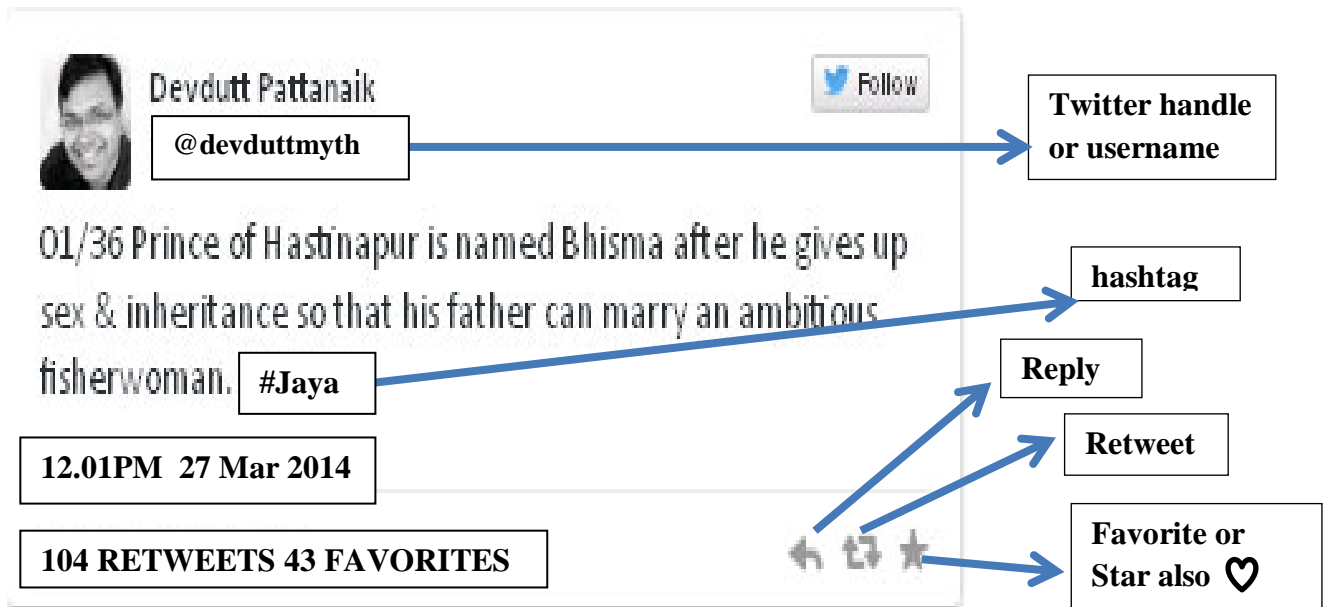
Apparently, in the process of creating a miniature version of a mammoth epic, there are bound to be gaps and silences. What follows is an emphasis on the *parvas* (chapters) covered (shown in italics) in Pattanaik's tweet *avatara* and the *parvas* which are ignored (shown in bold). The chapters or *parvas*[xvii] of the epic poem are**:** *Adi* (characters and tales introduced, rise of Pandavas and construction of Indraprastha); *Sabha* (gambling episode); *Vana* (12 years exile period); *Virata* (time spent in disguise in Matsya); *Udyoga* (peace efforts) (1-5 parvas); *Bhishma* (first commander) - Bhishma's efforts to defeat the Pandavas in the first 10 days and allusion to the Bhagvad Gita[xviii]; *Drona* (2nd commander) – next 5 days of battle; *Karna* (3rd commander) – 2

days, **Shalya** (4th commander) - 18th day; *Sauptika* – attack and killing of the Pandava heirs; **Stree** (wailing of widows); **Shanti** (peace); **Anushasan** (organizational discipline) (6-13); *Ashwamedha* - Yudhishtra's coronation and expansion of empire; *Ashrama* (elders go to the forest); *Mausala* (wiping out of Krishna's clan); *Mahaprasthanika* (renunciation of the Pandavas); *Swargarohanika* (ascent to heaven, death of Pandavas; Yudhishtra's anger and reconciliation in paradise).

The content is fitted to the conventions of the new age twitter form. The retelling is in the present tense with a view to making it a real-time experience characterized by a sense of immediacy and puts both the author and the reader-follower in the same time – present moment. So the first characteristic appears to be linear storytelling rather than circularity and frame stories, which are the key traits of the epic poem. Thus, rather than the familiar version of the epic, the dynastic battle between the Kauravas and the Pandavas, narrated during the snake sacrifice conducted by Parikshit (the only heir of the Pandavas), Pattanaik's tweet fiction begins directly with the third person narration with Bhishma's story in *Adi parva*. Nearly 24 male characters and 11 female characters have been mentioned in Pattanik's twiction[xix]. The action begins at Hastinapur and moves to and fro between forests (Khandava) and kingdoms (Hastinapur, Panchala and Indraprastha) followed by the Kurukshetra battlefield, the

final mountainous journey and the climatic reconciliation i.e. Yudhishtra's epiphanic realization in paradise.

Familiarity with the epic-fragments is of course an advantage for analyzing the allusions and references, however, the younger generation can also get hooked by the fragments and perhaps be motivated to read or search more about the epic and/or characters and episodes on the web. The generations are in the following order: Satyavati; Bhishma and Vyasa; Dhritarashtra and Pandu; Duryodana and Dushasana (Kauravas) and Bhima, Arjuna and Yudhistra (Pandavas); Ghatotkacha and Abhimanyu and finally Parikshit. Undoubtedly, in the process of condensing the huge epic into the capsule form of the twitter fiction, there are silences regarding some of the *parvas*/chapters, missing incidents/episodes, characters and actions and especially the complete lack of dialogues. Some of the nameless characters are Shantanu (Bhishma's father) and Madri's sons (Nakula and Sahadeva) and Ganga (Bhishma's mother). Vidhur (Vyasa's son by the maid) and Shakuni (Gandhari's brother and Duryodana's Uncle who is responsible for cheating the Pandavas in the game of dice) are completely silenced.

Vaishampayana, Vyasa's disciple narrates the epic (battle between the Kauravas and Pandavas) to Janmejaya (son of Parikshit who was killed by a snake) during the snake-sacrifice[xx]. Pattanaik deviates from this and begins with the episode of Bhisma's sacrifice. Why does he begin with Bhishma's story? Because, Bhishma is 'the last of the Puru line' and though called as *Pitamaha* (grandfather), he was not the

actual grandfather of the Kauravas and the Pandavas. (Thapar, 2009:1832) Another reason could be that it replicates the Indian 'Yayati complex', a counter-oedipal narrative, as Ramanujan (1999) has perceptively observed, for Bhishma gives up his desire so that his father can re-marry. Yet another reason is that Bhishma is the grandfather of both the Kauravas and Pandavas, although, in principle, Vyasa is the real grandfather[xxi]. The dynastic confusion continues with the mention of Kunti's mantras to procure sons for herself and Madri and an intermittent flashback in tweet 29 i.e. the illegitimate son of Kunti – Karna.

Three important events are mentioned with regards to Bhishma - his sacrifice, his role in appointing Drona as tutor, his refusal to fight Shikandi (Amba reborn) and his death by Arjuna's arrow. The words 'poet Vyasa' subtly refer to the poet attributed to the epic, notwithstanding the general agreement that the epic is a work of many authors. But Vyasa's role in the tweet fiction is limited to impregnating Satyavati's two daughters-in-law (except Vyasa's union with the maid and Vidura's birth) and transforming Gandhari's ball of flesh into 100 sons. In fact, the tweets are composed within the range of 94-139 characters in tune with the need for brevity of form. The conflicts revolve around Bhishma-Shantanu (father-son), Dhritarashtra-Pandu (brothers), Drona-Drupada (friends), Pandavas-Kauravas (cousins), Bhishma-Shikandi (enemies), Drona-Dhrishtadhyumna (revenge), Arjuna-Karna (brothers and foes). Indeed, Bhima has been mentioned first in keeping with the episode in the forest when he kills demons Baka and Hidimba and marries Hidimbi, who is his first wife. Bhima also kills Jarasandha, Dushasan, Duryodhana and all the Kauravas. The archery contest, wherein Karna is rejected and Arjuna weds Draupadi, is a turning point and Draupadi becomes the common wife of the Pandavas. Since, *Harivamsha* is an addendum, the Pandavas befriend Krishna to get back their kingdom and with Krishna's presence in the battlefield, the allusion to the Bhagvad Gita is crucial.

Each tweet is a precise and brief explication on the significant episodes/characters in each of the 18 chapters, however the first chapter occupies a greater part of the tweet fiction - tweets 1-19 summarize the events; 18-19 – the second chapter; 23 condenses the third and fourth chapters and 24 captures the fifth. The seventh, eighth and ninth chapters are fitted into two tweets each (25-26, 27-28, 29-30) to emphasize the important events in the Kurukshetra war under the commandership of Bhishma, Drona and Karna i.e. the death of Bhishma, Drona, Abhimanyu, Ghatotkacha and Karna. Tweet 31 is a brief summing up of the last day of the battle: 'Bhim kills all Kauravas; drinks Dushasan's blood; washes & ties Draupadi's hair; unlawfully strikes Duryodhan fatally on thigh'. Tweet 32 covers the fourteenth chapter - the victory and Ashwattama's revenge at night. Tweet 33 compresses the fifteenth and sixteenth chapters and alludes to Parikshit, the unborn son of Abhimanyu. 34-35 highlight the sixteenth and seventeenth chapters and tweet 36 concludes with the final chapter. Herein, chapters 9,11,12,13 are missing. The deviations, silences and simplifications or

over-simplifications become necessary for overcoming the content (vast epic) versus form (140 characters) dichotomy. On a final note, each character can work as a crucial link in the great hyper-text of the epic and provide the freedom to the readers to explore any link which will lead them to a different narrative.

Definitely not the last word Pattanaik's 36 tweets draw upon the epic's quality of malleability and proffer proof that it is possible to adapt the longest epic poem to the form of a twitter narrative and regenerate interest in Indian Literature, especially the epics. Twitter may be a promotional strategy, driven by publication economics and ephemeral but for the English language and literature teachers engaged in enhancing the language and literary skills of the digital learners, twitter fiction offers a wide-range of quick classroom activities. The learners who are on the WhatsApp in the classroom can be asked to use the mobiles for educative purposes. The fragments of tweet fiction, which may disappear, can be compiled. Pattanaik's version can be easily used in the classroom for reading activities and for enhancing oral skills. Classroom discussions can be conducted for regenerating interest in the epic and learners can retell the stories or alternative versions of the stories that they might have heard of or read about the epic. The form's simplicity can also be appealing for the learners who have been educated in their mother tongues and find it difficult to express their ideas in English. For writing activities, the learners can be encouraged to write about the incidents in their favorite epic character's lives.

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[i] This is slightly revised version of the paper presented at the National Conference entitled *Languages and Literatures of India* organized by Somaiya College, Vidyavihar on 6 and 7 July 2018.

[ii] For a fuller discussion, see Kehbuma Langmia, et al. (2014).

[iii] See Note 8.

[iv] A festival organized by Penguin Random House The Association of American Publishers and Twitter.

[v] See Maclean et. Al (2013) and Franklin (2014) for understanding Twitter and Twitter literature.

[vi] As per the information on the site (https://storify.com) the services will not be available after 17 May 2018.

[vii] For a quick overview, see Doniger (2017).

[viii] See the report by Tharakan (2009) for interesting details.

[ix] For fuller details, see the article in *The Hindustan Times* (2014). Chindu Sreedharan, a senior lecturer at Bournemouth University, began microblogging a reinterpretation of the *Mahabharata* and describes his book as 'Mahabharata for the Twitter generation'.

[x] See https://www.news18.com/news/tech/indian-epic-mahabharata-to-be-retold-on-twitter-from-villains-viewpoint-966627.html**.**

[xi] See Bhattacharya (2014).

[xii] See D'Mello (2014) for the fuller version.

[xiii] See https://twitter.com/MeghnaPant/status/443990474680848384 and https://twitter.com/devduttmyth/status/448992543250714624 , respectively.

[xiv] See **https://www.socialsamosa.com/2014/03/mahabharata-100-tweets/?utm_source=twitterfeed&utm_medium=twitter&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+SocialSamosa+%28Social+Samosa%29&utm_term=social+media.**

[xv] See www.indiatv.news.com

[xvi] See https://www.storypick.com/story-mahabharata-beautifully-retold-just-36-tweets/.

[xvii] For a fuller account of the Parvas, number of verses and a brief description, see Pattanaik(2010).

[xviii] As Thapar has observed, the Bhagavad-Gita is an interpolation into the epic and this dialogue between Arjuna and Krishna "is a prelude to the battle"(2009:1832).

[xix] The quick overview of character names in the order of their appearance in the tweeted version and the tweet number is as follows: Bhisma (1, 8, 26) Vyasa (2, 6), Pandu (3, 5, 7), Dhritarashtra (4,7), Gandhari (4,6), Kunti (5,8,29), Madri (5,7), Drona (8,9,27,28), Bhim (11, 19, 31), Baka, Hidimba, Hidimbi (11), Ghatotkacha (11, 27), Drupad (12) Draupadi (12, 14, 15, 21, 22, 32, 35), Shikhandi (12, 26), Dhritadhyumna (12 28), Karna (13, 29, 30), Arjuna (14, 18, 25, 26, 30), Krishna (15, 16, 21, 25, 30 34), Uloopi, Chitrangada and Krishna's sister Subhadra (18), Jarasandha (19), Yudhistir (19, 20, 33, 34, 36), Duryodhan (20, 31), Dushasan (21, 22 31), Abhimanyu (27, 33), Ashwatthama (28, 32), Parikshit (33)

[xx] See Pattanaik(2010) for the entire structure of Vyasa's epic which has a prologue and an epilogue i.e. the beginning and end of the Snake Sacrifice, wherein Janmejaya conducts a fire sacrifice designed to kill all the snakes for his father Parikshit was killed by the Snake Takshaka.

[xxi] See Thapar (2009) for a fuller discussion.