

## The Dilemma of Ethics

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Peter Brook's Mahabharata, opens with scenes of an almost comical Ganesha, in an elaborate head gear, holding forth the role of a scribe narrating to a boy (the listener) the story of the all-pervading Krishna. While doing this, he lies down, takes off his mask, and there within the mask is Krishna with his flute in his hand - the boy is stunned at this revelation, it is his first understanding of *Leela*<sup>1</sup>(illusion).

The sub-continent is full of stories that most of us have grown up with. From the great epics to the tales of animals in Panchatantra, or demons and gods in folk lore- our bed time stories, bustle with this very play of *Leela* manifested at every level, during our growing years. All such stories taught us to fall in love, delve into and believe in a certain kind of magic that often emanates from a constant re-telling of these tales through an oral history older than time, re-embellished and re-furbished, like a fascinating game of Chinese whisper from one generation to another. But our stories become far fewer as we grew older, more individualistic, and often lacking in that magical ability to weave into us, a blend of imagination with reality. And thus weakens our ability to fall in love with possibilities too.

What is *Leela* then, and what is reality and where do the twain meet or not, is a question I trace as I leaf through, script writer Jean- Claude Carriere's *Notes of Travels in India*<sup>2</sup> where he refers to anecdotal evidences through the team's search for the Mahabharata, still being played out in real life in India. During the team's visit to a forest, (not far from Madurai) to understand and listen to the sounds inside an Indian forest- keeping in mind the Pandavas exile- the team is given a task by Peter. They are to wander off and bring back an object that they find striking. The objects that each team member brings, is then piled in the middle of a clearing where they all stand. Objects like a leaf, a dead insect, a stone, or even a handful of earth find place here. It becomes a spectacle as each of these are piled on top of the other- a individual truth that showcases each person's perspective of the forest. All of a sudden, a peasant woman passes by. As she is about to cross them, she sees the piled objects, and without hesitation, prostrates on the ground with both her arms outstretched towards the collected heap, paying her humble obeisance. She has seen what looks like an offering and in her mind constructed a divine presence for whom the offering was supposedly laid out. The group of actors are stunned to silence, at the immensity of her personal truth.

What then we ask is a story, what is myth, what version of each are imagined and real? And what version of the truth guides these stories. Do we then end up imitating stories and their solutions in real life? Or do we remind ourselves that many of these stories are untrue, if not their solutions, and does this sense of the fictional make our journey towards truth easier?

This dithering, as it were, reminds me often of what we have come to know of as 'Wall Politics'. Throughout the history of mankind and associated geopolitics, every time we fail to come to a conclusion about our differences, we build walls. A childish conclusion, that not

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<sup>1</sup> Leela- A mysterious divine play

<sup>2</sup> Notes of Travels in India -A book by Claude Carriere on his travels through India.

only separates one half from another, but which also seems to indicate a line around which we confine our thoughts, saying as if to ourselves, *this much and no more*. A case in point is the partition of India and Pakistan, which while a political act, did not only happen on one date and time, but came about as an acceptance when we said to each other as if, that our politics is stronger than our emotions. In effect, we had stopped listening to each other's stories, to participate and live in them, and thus our realities became so far removed from our imagination, that we could no longer be together in the same geography too.

Luckily for man, where politics failed, curiosity kept us alive. And thus, the experiment of the pink see-saws installed by architect and anti-border wall campaigner Ronald Rael on the US-Mexico border in 2019, drew huge enthusiasm from families on both sides to 'play together'. With a simple and deft stroke, Rael reinstated in our minds the joy of playing together- a simple act of togetherness. Like songs, these see-saws achieved balance from one side to another by a careful judgment, placed in the hands of the individuals/children who volunteered to find the right measure of magic and reality.

Around the world, migration is more a reality today than it ever was. Far more people have migrated today for political and economic reasons, than the entire last century put together. And hence, our thoughts are largely governed by movement and inter mingling, where local values learn to co-exist amidst an ever-expanding horizon, that is multi-dimensional in ethnicity, culture and texture. Under the circumstances, our understanding of what has been our truth and its boundaries are constantly challenged and we fall back on a more universal understanding, a kind of honesty that comes from inhabiting and co-existing with many. And thus change our stories, its narration and interpretation too. Sooner than later, we become migrant-educated, understanding foreign lives through local eyes.

I grew up in the North East of India, where our red oxide floored Bengali home reflected the brilliant blue- green of the Patkai hills bordering Myanmar. Our home was mostly non-religious, except for the waft of an evening *Dhoop*<sup>3</sup> that my mother sometimes wandered around with, aiming the sticks in a vague circular motion resembling the odd circling of a dragon fly over a flower. My parents and both sides of the families, inhabit a larger refugee history that saw lakhs of people migrating from what was East Pakistan to the Indian states of Assam and West Bengal. As my grandparents made new homes here, the blurring of boundaries between a healing nature, shared loss of homes and new adjustments, is perhaps what made this space honest, even innocent. The stories they lived out of here, helped retain and create a certain magic, derived strangely off both their hard reality of the present and the romance of yesterday. Strangely enough, when I asked my father for stories from his journey as a refugee boy of five - the stories of pain I had imagined, were instead replaced with the adventure of finding new play mates, curiosity for a new geography and of new cats in temporary homes. I remain astonished at the resilience of these stories. Paths that were undoubtedly covered in new poverty and fresh pain, now tinged with the memory of adventure and the expectation of building new stories. I was regaled with the memories of songs sung together during chores, of the happiness of shared meals and the hope of a new land. This remarkable human capacity, to remember both joy and sorrow, to reiterate in the mind, stories both true and not, is perhaps where we live, grow and love the most. Like trees

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<sup>3</sup> Dhoop- Incense

we grow girth, structure and branches- make homes for others to rest and give birth, while new life emerges around us. As such, the Western need for documentation, sometimes seems futile in understanding such stories. And it feels more of an attempt to put into formula, this deeper source that resides in the loose structures that are often oral, shape shifting and transcendental in nature.

As a child I grew up in a non-writerly home, but we always had books and music around us. I realize now, that more and more I envy those writers who had stories read out to them, in some form or the other. While giving a book to a child is telling them to go explore the world, reading out a story is showing them the ship they can travel in. In reading out stories, we not only lend a voice, but also conjure the very characters- their vividness, tears, joy and laughter as opposed to one's own solitary understanding of it. The stories thus shared, now become yours to protect, expand and re-tell. In the end, you give to the story your imagination, just as it lends you your dreams. In my mind I ask, what then is the truth of our songs, our stories and of the literature we live in, and in whose footsteps, we grow up.

Spandan Banerjee in his film, *You Don't Belong* traces the journey of an extremely popular Bengali folk song, *Lal Paharer Deshe Ja*<sup>4</sup> that has travelled the far seas and survives beyond the land it was created and conceived in. The journey sees the film maker talking to poets, song makers, musicians and singers, all of whom share their stories that led them to this song and the search for its so-called author. The film reminded me of the many truths we inhabit and how each version becomes our very own. In this fluidity, that helps us recapitulate the innocence of boyhood, how do we pursue it. More importantly, as artists born to creativity, how do we go on then to re- create these stories in our mind, to tell them as our own? And in the process that follows, how do we distinguish the honesty of intention from the need to decorate it for public consumption? And while we become a part of this process, we also need to ask ourselves, how much of the truth garnered from these stories, is really relevant to the arts, can we do away with it, or is creativity an inevitable side glimpse at our own derivation of these unanswered questions?

And because we spread our wings in songs and stories, we seem to fall back into them too. But while we tell ourselves the stories of our origins, of our migrations, of new cultures, and of a history one saw unfolding, one must also question where myth and reality converge in these stories. Where in spite of the romance of its telling, a story is just that- a story. We live in a world where the existence of fake news is as real as myths that are increasingly being confused with historical facts. Where the story of Ram and Ravana is no longer a mythical illumination of what could be, but instead becomes cause for further demarcation of political-religious borders, into your history and mine.

As a side effect of the churn leading to a deeper understanding of ethics, we realise the profundity of certain universal truths that serve as pillars of human society. Man's search for peace, for beauty, the need to be loved, to work well, to fight for one's rights and have their voices heard- remain forever relevant. The stories we grow up with and continue to fall back on, inevitably reiterate these basics no matter where they are placed in the world. It is why in spite of these being folk tales, fantasies or even fiction, we relate to them so much. Sadly

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<sup>4</sup> Lal Paharer Deshe Ja- A Bengali folk music based on a poem written by Arun Chakraborty in 1970s

though, as we grow up both in age and in sensibilities, we also move away from these stories. It is almost as if imagination were a thing we can no longer trust.

We must of course acknowledge that we live in unprecedented times. Our expectations of arriving at the truth are obscure, because there is more often than not, the tendency to confuse the truth with what one believes in. That, the two are not the same, needs to be understood for us to start at the basics of right and wrong. Also, before one arrives at even a semblance of truth, there are far more hurdles to be crossed- that of constant self-appreciation, grotesque chest thumping, mass scale myth manufacturing, and concentration of power in a few hands.

How we arrive at truth, or even acknowledge the fact that the telling of truth has come to be extraordinary- when it should be normal, even regular and mundane in nature- seems to justify the existence and propagation of falsity, for which the truth must fight multiple battles and finally attempt to emerge victorious. The battle of truth versus falsity is as old as the human race, but its narrative and understanding changes over time and is reflected in the literature of the times, helping people in their individual journeys, if only they are willing to learn from it.

Culturally speaking though, we seem to have accepted the fact that one can no longer tell the truth from lies, and that the co-existence of both is no longer alarming, as much in public sphere as in personal lives. Does that then explain the re-looking and excitement towards non-fiction in recent times, an attempt of sorts on the part of the readers, to read more of what is perceived as reality at least? We must be aware too, of the alarming fact that the world of literature in both its wording and showcasing, has also begun to reflect the hegemony of convenience. We must ask of ourselves, have we become convenient story tellers, seeking a convenient truth, too afraid to deviate and tell the stories that matter instead of being content with the camouflage of acceptability?

In his 1997 film *Dahan* Rituparno Ghosh talks about our individual engagement with books and the trend of clubbing anthologies and works by an author, under the hegemony of similar thought process, in an attempt to make literature convenient. He talks about the need to preserve the individuality of each book, its essence, smell, individual cover design and identity- all of which make a book special. Literature by itself, is that character that need not mouth the best dialogues but whose actions and narrative, must speak louder than all the lines put together. I'm reminded of *The Vegetarian* a novel by Han Kang, of such startling dimensions that it feels both revolting and soothing at the same time, as an after effect of the tumultuous impact the thought process initiates. On the surface of things, it is a story about a woman Yeong-hye, who suddenly one day wakes up from a dream, refusing to eat meat anymore. Given the fact that the story is placed in Korea- in a family, and country where meat eating is predominant part of one's cultural landscape- the reactions to her decision seem life altering. At one point, after being admitted to a clinic, for attempting suicide, Yeong-hye bares her breasts in public in defiance. Her action seems born from relief at finally being able to behave, think and maneuver one's actions as desired by the inner self, rather than conforming to societal norms. She saves herself from the lies she is expected to inhabit.

In his film *Charulata*, Ray raises the very questions- this dilemma of ethics, as it were. He talks about mistrust and honesty in the same breath and reiterates, the principles on which society rests. To not be able to trust someone, one is fond of, he says is the biggest malice of

our times. How else do we progress in good faith and retain the values that make us. The summation is true for both people and literature.

A piece of creative work is often its own best defense and advocate of the ethics it advocates. For creators though, the search for beauty, happiness and truth often culminates in the journey itself. And often, we see this best showcased through the stories we imagine and write about. Stories rescue us from slipping into a world of curation, even while being curated themselves- they bring back the bizarre, the forgotten madness of the beautiful and help reveal a truth that mostly eludes us, especially through the lens of reality. As opposed to survival, a story is that ether which we seek out to understand the magic that surrounds life, for it is in this land of imagination, that we are most propelled towards the suspended illumination between living and death.

