

## Обзоры и рецензии



## Lakshmi Badalamudi. Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture\*

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It seems that in modern humanities such names as M. Bakhtin, L. Vigotsky and J. Lotman have at some point acquired supernatural powers. From then on these names have migrated from one paper to other being used as magic spells. By all means contemporary researchers tend to include in their arsenal the above-listed thinkers who are often referred to in numerical superiority in contrast to luminaries of bygone eras. Moreover, the concepts of these three scientists appear to be closely related to each other, although it is not exactly clear in what way. More puzzling is the connection between these thinkers in relation to a huge variety of contemporary themes. This book written by the American professor Lakshmi Bandlamudi is an example of this mysterious trend.

The book consists of five parts and ten chapters with two appendixes attached with tables and questionnaires designed for the interviews. The first part “About Theories and Philosophies” is the introduction. The author outlines the purpose of the study, which is an analysis of how cultural and individual factors create problems with interpretation in relation to the ancient text the *Mahabharata*. The practical part of the study is also described here: the criteria by which participants were selected and the structure of the interviews. The paper deals with American immigrants of Indian origin who were asked to review and discuss the four episodes of R. Chopra’s television series *Mahabharata*. The second part of the book is entitled “About Self”. It consists of two chapters devoted to the introduction and classification of the subjects of study. The first of these chapters includes excerpts from an interview in which the participants’ autobiographical memories are revealed. The author’s commentary is attached to this. In the next chapter, the study subjects’ “Self” is classified and categorised based on the received information. The results are presented in a table. The third part of the book is called “About Memory”. Here the author offers some reflections on the role and place of the epic in semantic maps of culture as well as in the conciseness of the individual. At this point excerpts from the interviews are reproduced from which we discover to what extent the participants are familiar with the text. According to this information further categorisation of the “Self” is formulated by the author. The fourth part, “About Interpretation”, consists of two chapters focusing on the discussions of the study subjects about four episodes of the television series. The author again offers original categories in order to analyse and classify the subjects’ perception. It is clear from the name

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of the final and fifth chapter, “About Self, Memory and Interpretation”, that the results of the study are brought to a conclusion.

The author brings up issues of extreme importance. “How do people make sense of their past ...? How do they draw the parameters for the meaning-making act?” [Bandlamudi, ix] Following M. Bakhtin’s writings, the author raises the problem of genre conditionality of our speech. The author asks: “What are the genres through which the personal and cultural past are narrated?” [ibid] The act of reading is the intersecting point of personal history, cultural situation and tradition. Accordingly, the author asks: “Does art have absolute authority over life and is life subordinated to art? Or is art a mere reflection of life?” [Bandlamudi, 3] Regarding this, the author turns to M. Bakhtin’s idea of mutual responsibility of life and art. In the author’s opinion the *Mahabharata* manages to grasp this complex relationship. We must be aware of the grandeur of the ancient Indian epic, for it is ten times longer than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined. United by a single didactic purpose the *Mahabharata* provided man with a certain picture of the world, a value system and behavioral patterns. The main task of the epic is to exhortate, which is solved through examples, illustrated in many stories and using different artistic tools. Thus it is a sacred text, which includes short stories, fables, parables, legends and arguments of a philosophical, theological, political and legal nature. All these texts are built into a single ideological system. As the *Mahabharata* has it: “That which occurs here occurs elsewhere. That which does not occur here occurs nowhere else” [The *Mahabharata*, book 18, section 5]. As explained by prof. Lakshmi Bandlamudi, Indian tradition compares the *Mahabharata* to a wheel. “The text itself evolved and continues to evolve and as such is referred to as Chakra — a wheel — and each generation serves as a cog to set this wheel in motion, thus enabling the evolution of the self and the text to occur in a synergistic fashion” [Bandlamudi, 4]. Accordingly, prof. L. Bandlamudi defines the tasks of the research: to analyse the relationship between the reader and the text, to analyse the methods of construction of an individual’s identity through the text and to investigate the influence of contemporary class, gender and ethnic conflicts on the interpretation of the ancient past [ibid.].

However, these worthy questions remain unanswered. The main difficulty with this research is the problem of sourcing the required materials. The actual text of the *Mahabharata* is never touched upon. Therefore the talk about problems of interpretation of textual tradition is not justified, although they are constantly raised by the author. The practical part of the study, the analysis of subjects’ interpretation, is based solely on episodes from the TV series. Even so, the author does not mark the fundamental difference between the language of text and the language of film. The author does not ask whether the text, adapted for the TV series, differs from the original text preserved for centuries. And what could be the nature of that deviation, if there is one? On the other hand, the TV series itself is not analyzed. It is not clear whether the TV series preserves the ancient structures or it is nothing more than an entertaining project. The film may have other objectives about which we can only guess. In any case, the author should have taken into account the secondary nature of the cinematic

text: modern notions of the epic have little to do with the original epic. Thus, the problem appears to have altered: the sacred text of the *Mahabharata* is claimed as the main source of research, although a secondary text is studied in its place. Therefore all the problems turn out to be shifted. For instance, not only is there a comparison between the behavior of an archaic women and that of a modern woman, but the behavior of a princess to a modern women. It is not taken into account that the text of the *Mahabharata* corresponds to the laws of the epic, which structure content in a specific way. For example, the kingdom in the epic, when discussing royal themes, should be arranged as a model of the universe. Subsequently, the fact that there are five brothers corresponds to the pentamorous structure of the world. We are talking about four cardinal points with the the king at the center. Thus it becomes clear why these five brothers have only one wife. The participants in this research, as well as any other modern person, could hardly understand such a concept, as the modern person searches for explanations on the basis of his or her own ideas and modern social background. The perception of an ancient man from the 5th century BC differs dramatically from our perception. But the author does not discuss these cultural shifts and differences anywhere, although it may be interesting to trace them. What is expected from this kind of research is the answer to the question: "How is an idea constructed regarding what a woman is, and in particular the princess Draupadi, in the minds of ancient Indians, and why modern people are unable to understand that?" The epic has a particular method of presenting material, where everything is highly symbolic and strictly structured. Such an interpretation of the world was taken for granted by ancient people. For the modern man, furthermore, for a man living in discontinuity with tradition, the epic text is something fundamentally different, and that should have been identified in the study.

The methodology of this work is the other major difficulty. The author states that amongst other sources, the study is based on M.Bakhtin and L.Vygotsky's writings. Besides, the objective is formulated as a request for a historical-philological analysis. However, much of the book is devoted to the practical research on the psychology of perception. This paper mainly analyses the individual's perception of the TV series. Here, we find neither analysis of the text, nor an explanation of the characters' behavior. Again, there is a shift, but this time the problem is methodological. Thus L. Vygotsky deals with "anatomy" and "physiology" of a text while revealing the complexity of perception of a work of art. He offers a careful analysis of the subjects together with an interpretation of the influence of the genre on a text. He reveals a contradictory attitude from part of the content towards the frame and the form. Finally, he speaks of affectivity and an emotional, sensual component of each work of art. In this paper we do not encounter a similar approach towards the subject. The film — as a significant unit — is not characterised, and its artistic and social aims are ignored. The natural reaction of the audience is the only thing that is taken into account. Accordingly, we do not understand the purpose of the references to M. Bakhtin. M. Bakhtin explores the way the consciousness is refracted in the literature. First of all he explores the textual tradition. On contrary, this

study deals with the issues of contemporary American culture, more specifically with the personal identity of American immigrants. Similarly, we can say that the text of the *Mahabharata* has nothing to do with this paper.

Finally we would like to mention that the theme of the study is very important and opens up a variety of opportunities. We believe that it is necessary to continue the research based on the accumulated material. Nevertheless, it may be useful to slightly alter the motion vector of the thought, to reframe and to narrow the issue. If the volunteers are the immigrants who include American text, one must somehow indicate their overall level of perception of the world in relation to the mode of thought of an ancient man. Simultaneously, it make sense to arrange the sources. We believe that a comparative analysis of the film and the text of the *Mahabharata* should take place. This would allow us to understand which text reaches the audience, what is actually compared and what is expected of the study subjects. Then, using the data on the updated programme, it would then be appropriate to address the global issues concerning cultural perception. In this case, as it seems to us, M. Bakhtin and L.Vygotsky's investigations would start to function properly.