Science Metaphors for Religious Contexts: Decoding Amruta Patil's *Parva* Duology

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The postmodern, 'post-truth' condition has been continually demonstrating how metanarratives and general belief systems can be debunked and deconstructed. One such metanarrative that has been centrally put to question is the assumption that science is predominantly a secular domain and religious dogmatism ought not to interfere with it. Meera Nanda's concern for mixing mythos with science is voiced in several of her articles and critical works where she stresses on the connections between postmodern Western thought and its indubitable impact on the contemporary Indian right-wing religio-political thought. (Nanda, 2003). In "Making Science Sacred", she writes, "how modern science itself. . . is being re-coded as sacred, either as affirming the Bible or the Vedas, or as 'lower knowledge' of 'dead matter' in need of spiritualization." (Nanda, np). In her arguments, favoring the retaining of secular nature of science, she appears to be vociferously against any intermixing of Vedas (or Indic philosophy) with science, claiming that such blurring of lines between the two strictly divergent domains does more harm to humanity than good; to use the terms 'Vedic' and 'science' together is not only an aberration but also absurd. Indeed, the quoting of events and instances from the Mahabharata and Ramayana for 'actual evidence' of progressive science having existed in ancient India, should be unequivocally rejected and in this regard any attempt at invoking science to spread religious falsifications should be considered an abuse of both science and religion. This however, does not imply that in a world replete with and made functional through images, infinite metaphors and plural belief systems, science and religion are absolute binaries and cannot be brought on a similar plane of thought, since there are more similarities here than differences.

A critical inquiry into the history and philosophy of the sciences enlighten us to the largely agreed upon truth that much medieval and modern science in fact, has been a search for the perfect universal order or design (attributable to God or the unseen cosmic energy). Both science and religion then, can be said to deal in a greater or lesser degree of abstraction. Science at least starts at hypothetical abstractions and progresses toward perceived concretization.The greatest similarity between the two is possibly their conscious or unconscious tendencies to speak through metaphors. As Stephen Happel rightly says,

> Metaphors in science and religion function as clues; on the one hand, they draw investigators forward and lead toward resolutions; on

> the other, they hold multiple possibilities not all of which can be actualised.(Happel, 8)

Art, as it were, repairs the wedge between the two fallen apart disciplines of human consciousness. It is through conceptual and artistic metaphors that we might be able to understand science and religion better. As is this article progressing, it should be disclaimed at the very outset that within it, there is not going to be either any apologising for religion, or a defense of science for the sake of science, but an attempt to see how the two need not always be seen as competing discourses for understanding the greater abstractions of God, truth, time and mind. They are not so incongruous as not to be understood in tandem; and any bringing together of these two apparently antithetical categories does not necessarily echo a forced union of the sorts Nanda finds so objectionable.

This paper discusses Amruta Patil's graphic rendition of the *Mahabharata* epic*,*as in her *Parva* duology (specifically *Sauptik Parva*), in the light of the argument that conceptual and visual metaphors from the discourse of science can carry astonishingly loaded potential to explain religious ideas; and such coalescing of apparently disparate disciplines does not challenge the truth values of either science or religion. *Mahabharata* is traditionally believed to be the *itihasa* that covers everything under the sun. The Book of the Beginning of this epic says, "What is here is elsewhere, what is not here is nowhere. There is nowhere to get to, it is all here now." In this sense, the epic as a whole is a metaphor for cosmic knowledge, ancient wisdom (if not ancient science). D I Srivastava decodes the title "Mahabharata" itself as a linguistic metaphor: *Maha* meaning 'great', *bha, ra,* and *ta* stands for *bhava* (emotions), *rasa* (essence), and *tala* (rhythm/beat/pattern), respectively. (*"*Introduction" to *Decoding Metaphor Mahabharata,* n.p). In the contemporary times, Amruta Patil's *Parva* duology: *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik Parva*, seems to deliver the utmost metaphorical retelling of the epic, through the medium of visual images, that are more complex metaphors than words. In my paper on the graphic novel retelling of the epics, I write,

> To reduce (such, sic.) narrative complications that embed the very structure of the narrative, Patil's choice of the medium of the graphic novel, allows her a poetic license to imagine the story through succinct and potent visual metaphors. …(Jha [Singh], 375)

Patil uses several metaphors in both her works to achieve a heightened sense of poesy, keeping true to the epic's original grandeur. What differentiates the two books

however, is that the latter, *Sauptik* is characteristically much more metaphorical compared to *Adi Parva* (if it can be called a prequel to *Sauptik*), both visually and verbally; and in it, the use of science metaphors is much more frequent than in the latter. These metaphors are scattered across the entire length of the telling, and stand out by themselves on the intermittently appearing sepia pages, in an otherwise vibrantly colored book.

The first of the metaphors I would attempt to discuss here is that of the 'RBCs' metaphor which recurs in both the books. In *Adi Parva,* Patil uses the image of the 'bloodstream' [see Image 1(a)] to visualize the ways in which a cosmic story travels in time, across eons… Through a panel showing red blood corpuscles, Patil in an artistic masterstroke evokes the 'red' of the violence that war wreaks, and the information that goes across blood lines and lineages through the blood cells, that are a life-making force, all at once.

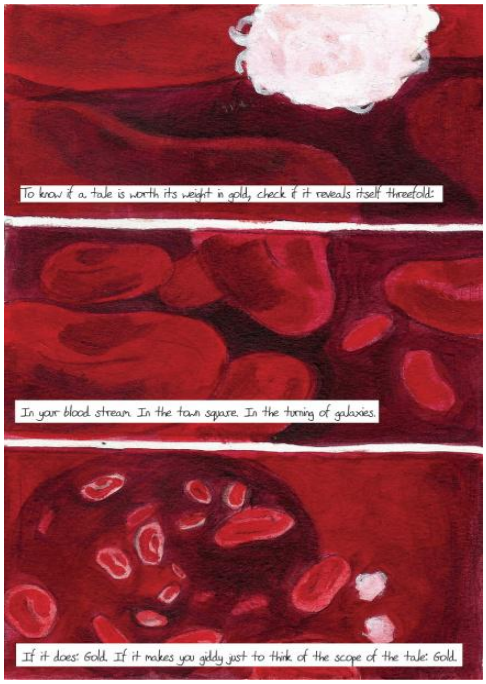

Image 1(a), (*Adi Parva,* p. 5)

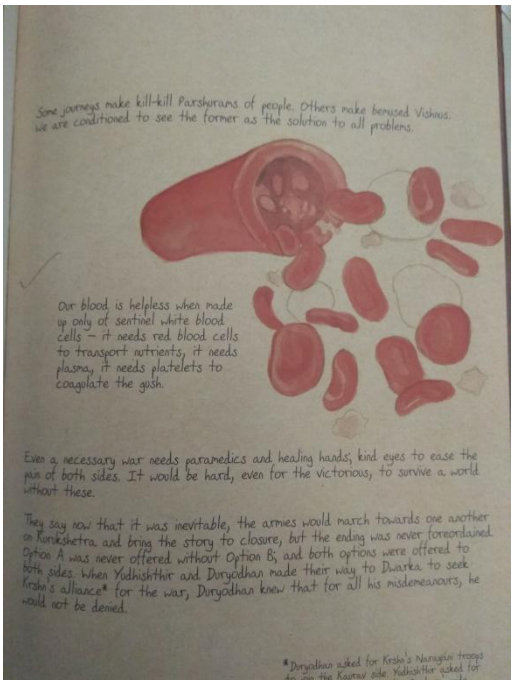

Image 1 (b), (*Sauptik,* p. 205)

This image is reiterated in *Sauptik* through a painted picture of a life cell spilling out the red corpuscles [see Image 1(b)]. The words against the image explain the indispensability of all the components of the life-affirming blood, "Our blood is helpless when made up only of sentinel white blood cells--it needs red blood cells to transport nutrients, it needs plasma, it needs platelets to coagulate their gush."

(*Sauptik,* 205). The same physiological metaphor is invoked into two different contexts to underscore different values and meanings

The other biology based metaphor Patil uses in *Sauptik* is that of the DNA double helix, functioning as an image equivalent of the concept of spatio-temporality'. Time as a metaphor is integral to a philosophical understanding of the epic. Pictorially representing the structure of the DNA, (see Image 2) the text amplifies the significance of the gene as a potent medium to carry a given information down histories and generations, "The most effective ways to send data into the future? To reproduce. To teach. To leave seeds buried to awaken in time, at the right moment." (*Sauptik,* 17). The immanent intelligibility of the metaphor of the double-helix (also a spiral, more or less) serves as a literal marker of the perpetual bond that genealogies and family trees form, as also conjuring up the symbolic effect of the narrative structure of the epic itself: an oral history passed down through an unbroken chain of *sautis* or narrator-storytellers.

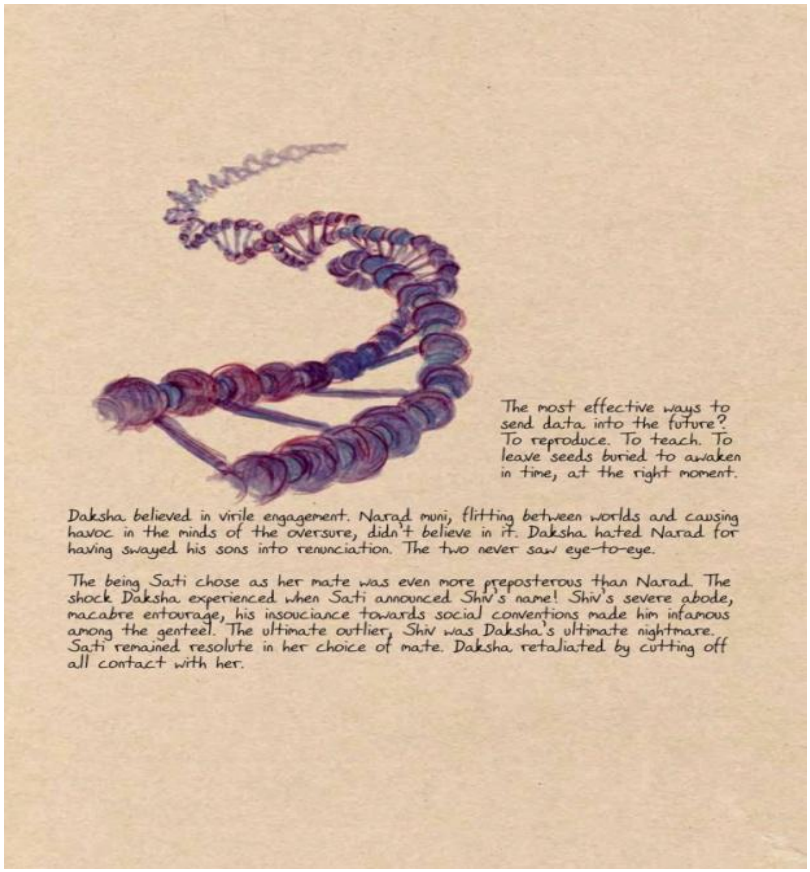

Image 2, (*Sauptik,* p.17*)*

Now for a scientist living in and out of his laboratory, this use of the double-helix to explain the Mahabharata's narrative structure, might pose to be problematic, as it seems to superimpose scientific concepts to non-science ideas, and attempts to qualify the latter as logical and scientific. But can, or rather should one own ideas? Is logic impenetrable to a layman altogether? Is intelligence only the scientist's domain? The work of a scientist is not just writing mathematical equations to prove a point; it is also their ethical responsibility to expressively convey to the common man how some of their scientific endeavors affect him. Metaphors structure human experiences in multi-dimensional directions, (Lakoff, 71) and metaphors from the sciences, though not intelligible to one and all, incarnate philosophical knowledge in ingenious ways, as is shown in the discussion of the DNA metaphor above.

Moving from biology and anatomy to physics, Patil displays dexterity in using commonplace science concepts to paint sublime truths from the epic. *Sauptik* is narrated by Ashwatthama, a character usually considered non-heroic in the epic. The aside sepia pages, which seem to function as a sneak peak into Ashwatthama's mind directly, are marked by unique stand-alone visual metaphors which interject the telling with what sound like interior monologues. Sometimes these metaphors draw inspiration from an eclectic religious philosophy and at other times there is simple science at work within them. At one instance, there appears an image of the light spectrum in all its seven colours: the ROY G. BIV or the Vibgyor (see Image 3).

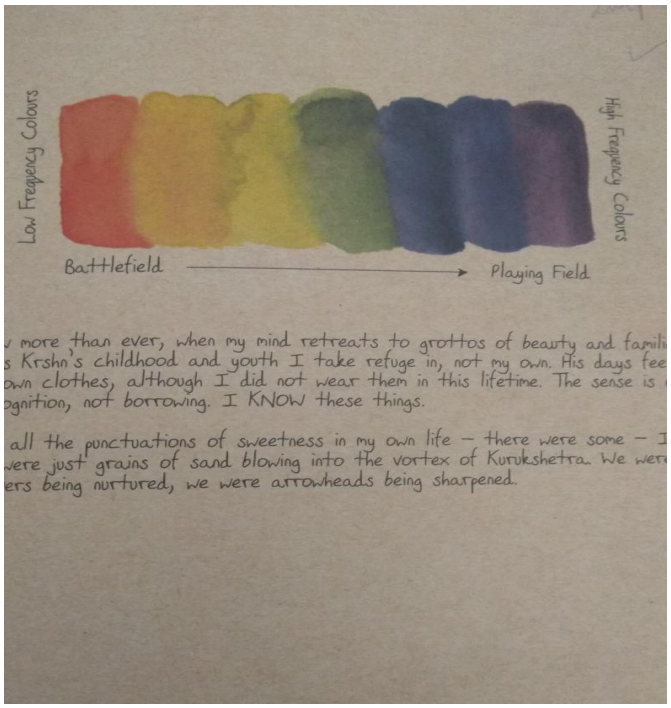

Image 3, (*Sauptik,* p. 65)

To the low frequency colors (red/orange) belongs the 'Battlfield' or the Kurukshetra war zone, while to the high frequency colours (violet/indigo) belongs what Ashwatthama calls the 'Playing Field'. This metaphor from physics, where the spectral colours of visible light are likened to 'perception' (what are colors if not perception of hues scattered across from the breaking of white light?) of the epic's story as a transition from the child's 'playing field' to the violence of the 'battlefield'; the cool blue winds and the violet flowerbeds of childhood witness a slow de-gradation into the red and orange fires burning within and out. Ahswatthama reflects, "we were just grains of sand blowing into the vortex of Kurukshetra. We weren't flowers being nurtured, we were arrowheads being sharpened." (*Sauptik,* 65) The multi-dimensionality of this science metaphor makes itself manifest when read in a slightly different light. This image of the spectral bandwidth appears when Ashwatthama is narrating what can be segmented as the '*Krishna purana'* or Krishna's legends. Krishna (an avatar of Lord Vishna) is believed to be the God of mischief and playfulness in the Indian pantheon. If looked at from this perspective, the whole universe is a product of Krishna's *leela* or 'play'. Acts of love and acts of war alike are all Krishna's doings and hence, Ashwatthama's crucial self-realisation that all the characters of the epic are scarcely more than "grains of sand" in the cosmic scheme of things panning out as planned in Krishna's playful mind, lends this metaphor a 'color' and density of pure philosophy.

This and other science metaphors that the *Parva* duology brings forth, are fine demonstrations making a case against (however unconsciously) the hard lining that exists between religious and scientific thought. Anindita Niyogi's assessment that, "to be religious is not to be unscientific, and to be scientific is not the same as to be committed to a doctrine of philosophical materialism" (67), is of much relevance here in reinstating what Patil does through her art. It is only when human consciousness evolves enough to reject the apparently antithetical dualism between science and religion, that we may begin to unlock the unknowable within our universe. If modern science and age old religion are both believed to be looking for the teleological answers in the design and order of the universe, then both of these domains can be seen as diverging strains of a similar (if not the same) cosmological project: that of fixing a purposive and semantic value to the world we live in, and in doing so the two might adopt opposing attitudes, develop contrary (often antagonistic) methodology

and yield absolutely polar results. Rarely do such experiments (as Patil's *Sauptik*) choreographing the playful dance of science and religion, make an appearance in public light; but when they do occur, their effect is surprisingly incandescent.

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