

Magic Realism and Magical Powers in Heroes of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata

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Abstract: *This paper is an attempt to explore magical realism present in the great two Indian epics called Ramayana and Mahabharata by Vyasara and the former by Valmiki. The term magical realism is to accept magical elements as a usual component in day-to-day life. It shows the alternatives to reality or hyper-reality of life. Most of Ramayana and Mahabharata's magical incidents happen through the heroes and their weapons; the common weapon in the two epics is the spear, bows, Gada, sword, axe, etc. When the weapons are pronounced in the tone of magical realism, the power of these weapons takes a mighty dimension. With such weapons, most of the magical incidents take place in those two great epics. Hanuman, the Zoomorphic character and Bhima, the superhuman, of Mahabharata play a vital part in the two great epics.*

Keywords: *Rama, Lakshmana, Sita, Hanuman, Arjuna, Bhima, Weapon, Magic, Magical Realism, Supernatural, Asthra.*

1. INTRODUCTION

According to Viyasar, magical realism is painting reality with the mixture of magical elements, and magical realism is often presented with magic or supernatural elements in a real-world setting [1]. Magical realism is generally considered to show the alternatives to accept the reality and show against political regimes. Due to the high adaptation of different authors globally, magical realism has turned to be blended with other genres. But the ultimate aim of magical realism is to use the magical elements to picture the reality, but magical realism is different from fantasy.

Ramayana and *Mahabharata* are the two great epics of India in Hinduism. It is generally believed that *Mahabharata* took place around a thousand years later to *Ramayana*. The Hindu philosophy says four yugas in history [2]; Satayuga, Tretayuga, Dwaparyuga, and Kalyuga. According to the yogas, *Ramayana* took place in Treatayuga and *Mahabharata* in Dwapar Yuga, a thousand years later. Hanuman is the only character who comes in both *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* [3]. It is also believed that the character Rama of *Ramayana* is the seventh incarnation of Lord Vishnu and the character Krishna in *Mahabharata* is the eighth incarnation of Lord Vishnu [4].

2. MAGICAL REALISM IN RAMAYANA

When the Demon army of Ravana and the Animal army of Rama indulged in war, Lakshmana took deadly wounds [5]. To cure his wound, Hanuman was asked to bring medicinal herbs from Himalaya. So, he jumped over from Lanka to Himalaya on air, but he

couldn't find the exact medicinal herb [6]. So, he lifted to the whole mountain that was filled with herbs and flown to Lanka. Hence, it is accepted as the ultimate magical realism in *Ramayana*. Ravana's death is another instance where Rama used many magical weapons to kill Ravana, but he couldn't kill him. When Rama cut off Ravana's head, it grew up again, and again. According to mythology, Ravana's death was hidden in his own body, secretly unknown to anyone. Finally, Rama found the primary head and killed him [7].

The bridge that was built towards Lanka across the sea itself was great magic. The monkey army that built the bridge with the floating stones was another magic [9]. Though many magical incidents took place in *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, most magical elements were used with supernatural weapons [8]. The following are the Asthras (weapons) and with their usage, description, and possessors [10].

3. ASTHRAS (WEAPON) USED BY RAMA IN RAMAYANA

Brahmastra – Rama used it against the sea God Sagar when he asked Sagar to give way to Lanka. But Sagar was not heeding to Rama, so Brahmastra was used against the sea and God Sagar [11]. Finally, Sagar complied to Rama and gave way. Thus, the weapon was redirected by Rama to create a minimal impact [12].

...once against Jayanta (Indra's son) when he hurt Sita, against Mareecha in their last encounter, against the Ocean when he did not answer his prayer to allow his army and himself to cross over Lanka and finally in the last battle with Ravana.

Prasvapna – on the advice of Vibheeshna, Rama used it against Ravana to drain the nectar (Amrita) from Ravana which protected him from not dying [13].

...Upon the advice of Agastya, Rama worships Lord Aditya, the Sun, with the famous Aditya Hridayam prayer and then invokes Prasvapna. Rama fires the great arrow that enters Ravana's chest/stomach and evaporates the store of amrit, finally killing him...

Gandharvastra – Both Rama and Ravana possessed this weapon. But Rama used it against Ravana's army which affected the psychological state of the Asuras. It created an illusion among the Asuras that their men appeared to be Rama [14]. So, they start killing each other thinking that they are killing Rama, which ultimately killed 1400 asuras to death.

Sri Rama's arrows took a heavy toll of whole sections of the rakshasa army. Once Sri Rama roared like a lion and, fixed the gandharvastra to his bowstring and shot it. At once, thousands of arrows leapt from the bow and began to massacre the rakshasas. The arrows seemed to fill the entire sky. All the rakshasas who had accompanied Khara, barring a few who was lying injured, were now dead.

Manava astra– It is another type of magical weapon used by Rama when he was a student at Vishvamithra's Gurukula [15]. When Vishvamithra was doing six days of Yajna (a Prayer) Maricha a Demon troubled Vishvamithra on the sixth day of Yajna, in the form of a cloud, thunder and blood rain to stop the yajna fire [16]. Rama, a student of Vishvamithra and the guard of Yajna, Fired the Manavastra against the Demon Maricha that drowned him into the Ocean [17].

His first strategy was to prevent the filthy matters falling on the sacrificial platform and, for that, he created a roof-like structure by deploying arrows to the effect, over the platform. Then, Rama sent Manava Astra to hit Maricha, which threw the later across the seawater beyond one thousand Yognas, Maricha was, however, not killed.

4. LAKSHMANA'S MAGICAL WEAPONS

Varunastra – It is a magical weapon possessed by Lakshmana, and he used it against Meghnad/Indrajit, the son of Ravana [18].

A huge fire rose to the skies. Both were enraged that their arrows had been rendered ineffectual. Lakshmana shot the Varunastra, and Indrajithu replied with the Raudrastra. Lakshmana overcame Indrajithu Agneyastra with his Saurastra.

Sauryaastra - Lakshmana used it against Meghnaad's Aagneyastra to neutralise the effect of the heat. Sauryaastra played a vital role in Lakshmana's victory [19].

...Then Lakshman used Varunastra which Meghnaad failed; Meghnaad used Aagneyastra which Lakshman stopped with His Sauryaastra. Seeing this, Meghnaad got unconscious with fury.

Maheshwar – Lakshmana used it against Meghnaad's Asur weapon. Lord Shiva bestowed Maheshwar Astra.

...Maheshwarastra Astra of Lord Maheshwara, a form of Lord Shiva, Contains the power of Shiva's third eye. Shoots a really fast fiery beam which can turn even celestial beings to complete ashes...

Indrastra – Lakshmana used it to kill Meghnaad/Indrajit at last.

...Indrastra never missed its target. Flying through the air like a streak of lightning, the Indrastra severed Indrajit's head off. His crown fell to the ground and golden earrings flung far off.

5. A POWERFUL WEAPON THAT MADE RAMAYANA HEROES STUMBLE DOWN

Vasavi Sakthi – This Astra used by Meghnaad against Lakshmana, that led Lakshmana to fall unconscious in the battle field [20]. This incident made Hanuman carry Sanjeevani on air from mount Himalaya to Lanka by leaping over the sea.

..Indrajit used the Vasavi Sakthi against Lakshmana, and upon being impaled Lakshmana fell unconscious, poised to die precisely at the following sunrise.

Naagpaash – This astra possessed by Meghnaad which he used against Rama, that imprisoned Rama and Lakshmana motionless. Hanuman is the one who sought the help of Garuda to free Rama and Lakshmana [21].

...When Rama and Lakshmana appeared before him, he fought fiercely and made both the brothers unconscious using his most nefarious weapon Nagapash (a trap made of a million snakes). Both the brothers fell on the ground breathless...

In *Ramayana*, the hero himself is considered as a demigod, the incarnation of Lord Vishnu [22]. Rama is a son of the king Dhasaradha, the king of Ayodhya. Rama fought with Rakshasas to save the wise who seek his help. Rama's brother Lakshmana also fought with the demoness Surpanaka. He cut her ears and nose, and Rama has fought with Surpanaka's brother, Ravana, who abducted Sita, the wife of Rama, to marry her [23].

There were some other supernatural, magical characters in this epic. Rama was about to help a monkey king, called Sugriva, to get back his kingdom from his half-brother Vali [24]. This help made the monkey king Sugriva to help Rama to bring back his wife from Lanka. An important supernatural character is 'Hanuman' the son of Lord Vayu [25]. He was to inform Sita about Rama's arrival to rescue her, so he made a magical leap to Lanka to find Sita. That helped to pacify Sita in Lanka. Finally, that supernatural battle took place in Lanka, at last Rama won the battle over the death of the demon king Ravana.

6. SUPERNATURAL ACTIVITIES OF SITA

After the victory against Ravana, Rama and Sita entered a crucial situation where Sita was made to prove her chastity with Rama. Sita had to walk through fire to prove virtuousness towards Rama. So, she walked through a fire which was so magical that Sita crossed the

burning fire unharmed. At this magical event, she was praised a lot not only by people but also by the Gods.

7. MAGICAL REALISM IN MAHABHARATA

Mahabharata mostly deals with war, so the magical realism starts from weapon possession of various characters. Here, the weapon is also called Asthras, as it was in *Ramayana*. Most of the characters possess those Asthras by invoking certain deities. Some Asthras are bestowed to them by the masters to their accomplished students who were very usual during yore days. Though the war Kurukshetra was between the two groups: Pandavas and Kauravas, they frequently used those Asthras that aroused magical effects in the wars. Such magical elements were considered to be real according to the text of *Mahabharata*. The weapons such as Sudharsana Chakra, Bramasthra, and Pashupatastra are considered the topmost weapons possessed by some notable characters of Mahabharata.

The magical dice which was used in gambling played a major role in *Mahabharata*. In the game of dice, Shakuni used this magical dice to get his victory. As a result, Pandavas lost their wife, Draupadi. She was dragged to the court by Dushasana, the brother of Duryodhana. Here, Dushasana tried to disrobe the saree of Draupadi. Still, the Magical power of lord Krishna's, who was absent in the hall, gave endless lengthy saree that made Dushasana's attempt to fail. Though it is a magical event, everybody accepted it as a reality in the world.

The birth of Pandavas itself has got some magical realism. All five Pandavas are born through mantras, and they are considered as demigods. In *Mahabharata*, the five brothers possess magical powers; the eldest of Pandava brothers is Yudhishtira, 'the just' has possessed some magical aura. Bhima and Arjuna too possessed many superhuman powers, and the last two brothers Nakula and Sahadeva, also possess some supernatural abilities in *Mahabharata*.

Yudhishtira has the power to destroy his foes into ashes which is his natural ability, so when he was forced to exile, he deliberately avoided seeing his uncle Dhritarashtra. He also created a copper vessel from the Sun God Surya, to feed his family and the guests when he was in exile. He also possessed a chariot which can run above the ground level, but he lost it when he lied about Asvatthaman's death.

Bhima, another powerful brother of Yudhishtira, possess 1000 elephant's strength. This magical power came to him only because of Duryodhana and Shakuni's plot against him. They gave him poison and dumped him into the river that made Bhima fall directly into the city of Nagas. The serpents bit him, but that acted as an antidote to Bhima, so he woke and started attacking them. Later, the Naga king Vasuki realised about Bhima's identity and prayed for an apology. Later, the king of Naga gave Bhima a secret potion that brought 1000 elephant strength to him.

Bhima married a rakshasa woman who used to eat humans. When Pandavas were in exile, they lived near rakshasas territory for some days, and there he was lured by Hidimba, a rakshasa woman and a sister of rakshasa king Hidimba. Later, Bhima came to know that she is a rakshasa. So, he killed the rakshasa king and ruled that territory for a certain period.

When Bhima reached Ekachakra town which is ruled by the Kichaka kingdom, he learnt that a rakshasa called Bakasura was ruining the people by demanding a cart full of humans as his food. Pandavas family came there as a guest to a Brahmins family. Unfortunately, it was that family's turn to go as a portion of food to that rakshasa. On knowing this, Bhima took the turn and went to the rakshasa with a food cart, and he ate all the food which was kept in the cart. Upon knowing this, Bakasura took the fight with Bhima. Bhima killed the Bakasura rakshasa in this duel and freed the people.

Another magical fight was between Jarasndha and Machado. In this duel, Bhima tore Jarasandha into two pieces with the help of Krishna's gesture. Bhima achieved such a magical victory in this duel. Bhima has also fought with a Rakshasa called Krimira, a Hidimb and brother of Bakasura. Bhima fought with him by plucking the trees from the land. Finally, Bhima killed Krimira in Kurunegala forest while they were in exile.

8. BHIMA'S MAGICAL ENCOUNTER WITH HANUMAN

Draupadi was fond of a flower smell which was in the bank of river Ganges. So Draupadi asked Bhima to bring such an aromatic flower. Bhima searched the flower, on the way near to the flower he encountered a monkey, Bhima asked him to move the large tail of that monkey which was blocking his way to the garden. The monkey mocked him by saying "are you talking to me". Bhima lost his temper and yelled at the monkey. Later, the monkey challenged Bhima to move its tail if possible. Bhima tried his best to accept the challenge, but he couldn't move the tail a bit.

At last, Bhima accepting his failure and surrendered to the monkey to know who is it. The monkey revealed that he is Lord Hanuman, a son of 'Vyu' and Bhima's brother. Bhima prayed for Hanumans' visvarupa' so Hanuman grew up in giant size and blessed Bhima that he will be with him in war. Bhima fought with many rakshasas while he was about to get that Saugndhika flowers. Even in the Kurukshetra war, he showed mighty powers which are unbelievable now, and he played a major role in Pandavas victory.

Arjuna is another renowned warrior in the *Mahabharata*, and he is one of the best archers in *Mahabharata*. He was a loyal and brave man and never veered his duties. He is also considered as an important character in *Mahabharata*. Most of his magical scenes took place only with his archery skills and he possess many magical asthras too, which are as follow with the name of the weapon and its description:

Akshaya tundra: This weapon is possessed only by Arjuna. Akshaya is unending; tundra means quiver. This weapon was given to Arjuna by Vayna which gives a magical unending arrow from Arjuna's bow.

...Whenever Lord Agni tried to burn the forest, and Lord Indra quietened him down by causing rain to be Arjuna & Krishna vs Nagas & Indra. Lord Agni summoned Lord Varuna (god of the sea) to provide Arjuna & Krishna as weapons less. Arjuna was given- the Celestial Bow Gandiva, Akshay Tarkash (a quiver that would never be empty of arrows), a Celestial Chariot with white steeds (horses)...

Agneyastra: This magical weapon would emit inextinguishable fire flames when used.

... Krishna addressed Hutasana saying "I shall invoke the celestial fire pancake so that you will never again suffer from hunger. He urged Arjuna both 'Agneyastra' and Vayavyastra and said he would take care of the rest".

Varunastra- Arjuna used this weapon as a counter for Karna's Agneyastra when it was released it would release torrential volumes of water.

...a rapidly rolling bank of clouds covered all directions in darkness. Their walls the equal of mountains, they swamped everywhere with water. As a result of their immense force that fire was extinguished despite its ferocity.

Nagastra- Arjuna and several other characters possessed it, but Karna originally used it against Arjuna in the Kurukshetra war.

...The nagastra was capable of killing Arjuna in single-shot confessed by Karna himself...

Nagapashastra- It is similar to Nagastra, but it will bind the target with poisonous snakes.

...Arjuna shot Agni Astra which Karna countered by shooting meg, Astra. Arjun shot nag pash, but before it can come close, Karna broke it by shooting Garud Astra.

Garudastra- This astra is used against Nagastra.

Nagapasham was the celestial weapon equal to Nagastra while Garudastra was the eagle weapon to counter against the Nagastra

Sanmohanastra- It is Possessed only by Arjuna, and it was used in the virata war capable of putting the entire army into a trance.

... It was evening, and Arjun did not want to Kill the kurus, so he decided to put them to sleep, it was the best way to end the war...After using Sanmohanastra, Arjun waited till they all recovered...

Brahmastra- This weapon creates more damage than any other weapon. It will create a severe environmental hazard that leads to barren land, human and animals. Arjuna and several other people possess this powerful weapon in *Mahabharata*.

In epic Mahabharata, it points out that during the Kurukshetra war, Karna neutralised a Brahmastra discharged by Arjuna with an equal Brahmastra and the destruction it caused by the colliding of this astra's was catastrophic.

Bramashirshastra- Possessed by arjuna and some other characters, but used only by Ashwatthama. This is considered to be four times more powerful than Brahmastra. There is no escaping from this weapon when it is used.

...It is thought that the Brahmashirsha Astra is the evolution of the Brahmastra, and showered a shower of meteors to annihilate the enemy... The characters Sage Agnivesa, Drona, Arjuna and Ashwatthama possessed the knowledge to invoke this weapon...

Pashupatastra- This astra is possessed only by Arjuna, and it is considered one of the powerful weapons that can target any type of weapon.

Dhritarashtra Said to Sanjaya

...When I heard that Arjuna, having, in combat, pleased the god of gods, Tryambaka (the three-eyed) in the disguise of a hunter, obtained the great weapon Pasupata, then O Sanjaya, I had no hope of success.

Anjalikastra- This weapon was used against Karna by Arjuna to behead him, and it is the weapon of Indra.

Karna got down from his chariot to free the wheel and asked Arjuna to pause, reminding him of the etiquette of war. Still, Krishna spurred Arjuna to attack Karna, reminding how Karna killed Abhimanyu by stabbing him from behind- which are against the rules of engagement of the war. Being spurred by Krishna, then Arjuna used Anjalikastra to kill Karna which cut the head of Karna, leading to his death.

Gandharvastra- This weapon is possessed only by Arjuna, and the magical effect is the chariot's illusion. If this weapon is used the chariot will travel at the speed of light and it will be protected by a magical shield so that warriors in it and the chariot will be safe and can be present illusionary in different places.

Practising ascetic penances, Arjuna had obtained that weapon from the Gandharva Tumvuru and others. With that weapon, Abhimanyu now confounded his foes.

Rudrastra- Arjuna and some other characters possess this weapon, but Aswathama is the one who used it at the end of the war. This weapon is capable of destroying enemies in thousands.

Rudra Astra Considered as the powerful weapon, and it accommodates the power of one of the Eleven Rudras, the terrible energies of Shiva. In the Mahabharata, Karna attacked Arjuna with Rudra Astra that pierced his Shiva Kavach on his chest...

The following are few more important weapons possessed by other characters in Mahabharata, they are

Narayanastra – Possessed by Drona and his son Aswathama – it is a collection of weapons which could attack simultaneously, and it seems there is no other weapon to stop this weapon

because it is the weapon of Lord Vishnu and the only way to survive is to submit to this weapon when it is about to attack.

Bhargava – Possessed by Parasurama and Karna, is considered a powerful weapon bestowed by Parashurama to Karna.

Sudarshana Chakra - Weapon of lord Vishnu possessed by Krishna in *Mahabharata* and Krishna is considered Lord Vishnu's incarnation.

Bramandastra- It is considered another powerful defensive weapon that can destroy the solar system and is possessed by Parasuram, Drona and Karna.

Vaishnavastra – It is considered the fastest asthra and possessed by Bhagadatta, and only Lord Vishnu can use this weapon, and it is considered a celestial weapon.

Vasava Shakti – Possessed by Karna and he used it against Ghatothkachan, the son of Bhima. Though Karna was about to use it against Arjuna, he was forced to use it against Ghatothkachan to save the army of Duryodhana.

9. CONCLUSION

These are the magical weapons used by various characters in The *Mahabharata* and The *Ramayana* according Hindu available mythological evidence. To sum up, the scholar tried to bring out the Magical element, magical realism and supernatural abilities of the heroes in both the epics The *Ramayana* and The *Mahabharata*. Though the two great epics were created with thousands of years difference, they still possessed the same Magical elements which are considered very uncommon in reality. Valmiki and Vyasar stood unique in projecting the difference between virtue and sin with the magical realism in their character picturisation.

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