C H A P T E R XVIII.

Characterisation.

The art of characterisation is as important for a poet as for a dramatist. The greatest of all the gifts of a poet is the gift of breathing life into his creation. It is by this power that he rises to kinship with the divine creative energy of the universe. The great poet Kālidāsa amply illustrates this point. He has given the world a grand and great galaxy of immortal characters that live for ever. But as far as the Śiśu. is concerned, we feel that the poet Māgha does not pay proper attention to this excellent art of characterisation though he does delineate several characters in the poem. The most striking feature of the poem is that there is not a single female character. This may be probably due to the fear that its introduction may be detrimental to the development of the plot of the poem. We, however, think that there is scope for a female character in the poem without its arresting the development of the plot. The following remark made about the power of characterisation of later poets in India deserves consideration. "All heroes are cast in the same heroic mould; all love-sick heroines suffer in silence and burn with fever; all fools are shrewd and impudent by turns; all knaves are heartless and cruel and suffer in the end; and there is not much to distinguish between one warrior and another, between one tender woman and her sister."[1] Although this remark is not applicable to the poet Māgha it may be

---

1. K.S.Ramaswami Sastri, Kalidasa. Vol. II, p.81.

admitted that he does pay proper attention to this special art and his characters are not dynamic. The following character-sketches will bear out the statement.

The poem contains seven major characters, viz., Kṛṣṇa, Śiśupāla, Nārada, Udhiṣṭhira, Uddhava, Bhīṣma and Baladeva. All these characters are 'true'. The minor characters are Sātyaki, the envoy of Śiśupāla, Dāruka, the four Pāṇḍavas, Pradyumna, several kings on both the sides and the reference to the ladies. Out of these, the envoy of Śiśupāla and most of the kings on either side are the inventions of Māgha. There is a reference to Draupadī (XIV. 22) though not by name and to the Pāṇḍava ladies (XIII. 16) in general.

We take up the major characters first in order of their importance in our poem.

(1) Kṛṣṇa:-

Following the rules of a classical poem, the poet chooses a god as the hero of the poem. But he has no occasion to deal with the whole life of Kṛṣṇa and therefore depicts him only in so far as he is concerned with the two principal events i.e. the protection of the Rājasūya sacrifice and the Killing of the enemy king Śiśupāla. This is only one of the many feats performed by Kṛṣṇa. Considering the negligible attention paid to the development of other characters, we feel that the poet pays special attention to the development of the character of Kṛṣṇa.

That Kṛṣṇa is a great and grand king is obvious from his great army, paraphernalia, weapons etc.

Kṛṣṇa's extraordinary beauty of face and figure and unique colour and complexion have been the theme for singers for all times. Māgha also refers to this aspect. Kṛṣṇa possesses physical excellence (I. 19). His taste in dress is shown by the fact that he generally wore yellow-silk. He is the cynosure of the fair sex and simple village-maidens (XII. 37, 39, 51) and even the cultured ladies of the city (III. 16; XIII. 20) lose their hearts to him. His physique is grand and strong and is easily able to withstand the strains of long journey (III, IV and XII), difficult camp-life (V) and hard battles (XIX and XX).

He is a lover of nature enjoying and appreciating natural beauty. He looks at the forest (III. 70, 71), the ocean (III. 72), the rivers (3/75) and the clouds (III. 74) with pleasure and admiration. He is struck with the beauty of the mountain Raivataka (IV. 17). It was delightful for him to enjoy the country sights e.g. the dancing and the singing shepherds (XII. 38), milking of the cows (XII. 40) and the ladies watching the ripening paddy crops (XII. 42).

He is also the store-house of moral excellences. He has high regard for the sage Nārada and this is indicated in his getting up from his seat to receive him (I. 12), offering to him the due reception (I. 14) and in his feeling immensely happy by honouring him (I. 7) and on his arrival (I. 23). Again the same high regard

for the sage is reflected in his short and sweet speech in I. 26-29 and he considers himself blessed at the sight of the holy sage. He is extremely affectionate, polite and helpful to his dear friends especially the Pāṇḍavas. He loves them, respects them and wishes them victory all the times. His treatment of Yudhiṣṭhira is praiseworthy. He gets down first from the chariot to greet the Pāṇḍava king (XIII. 7) and pays his respect first to him (XIII.8). He is equally courteous in greeting the other brothers too (XIII. 14) and surprises us by his politeness by inquiring after the health of all the members - young and old - of the Pāṇḍava family. He knows them all by their names (XIII. 68).

He is free from anger (XVI. 25, 26; XVII. 19) and bragging (XVI. 31, 32); he is forgiving and patient (XV. 40) and he is true to his word (XV. 42). He remains unmoved either by praise or censure (XIV. 3; XVII. 19) and no less a personality like Yudhiṣṭhira certifies to this effect (XIV. 3). He is serene by nature (XIV. 3).

He is exceedingly rich in emotion and consequently there are several shades of the emotion of love and unfortunately but inevitably, of the emotion of hate also. Such human relationship as the master (Kṛṣna and Dāruka), as the friend (Kṛṣna and the Pāṇḍavas, IV, XIII-XV) and as the brother (Kṛṣna and Baladeva,II) is painted by Māgha and consequently we find it embodying a shade-dim or vivid- of such an emotion. Just as all this relationship illustrates his love, his dealing with Śiśupāla similarly illustrates his stately treatment of hate.

He is a completely reliable friend and his help is anxiously sought by his friends like Yudhisthira as a farmer waits for wind for winnowing grain (XIV. 7). He is willing to accept even an humble appointment at the sacrifice for the sake of his friend (XIV. 15) and assures him complete protection and successful completion of the great sacrifice (XIV. 16).

He is a wise politician and does not insist that his opinion alone is the correct guide to the action to be taken (II. 12). Like a true Kṣatriya, he is impatient to right the wrong and hence he favours the policy of the immediate declaration of war against the enemy (II. 10) but at the same time he is ready to accept and act according to the saner opinion expressed by a wise and an experienced person (II. 12). This shows his political sagacity. It may be noted in this connection that it is not for his self-interest but for the welfare of the suffering humanity that he proposes immediate eradication of the enemy[1] (II. 11). This clearly indicates that he stands for the distressed and the down-trodden.

He is the great generalissimo of a vast army, the veteran warrior and the perfect master of various weapons. The entire Yadu army obeys even his gesture (XV. 41). This is seen when Śiśupāla ran down Krsna with harsh words just after the offering of the highest honour to the most deserving Kṛsna. Another good point of Krsna as a generalissimo is stressed by Māgha when he

---

1. न द्वेषे सात्वतीसूनुर्यन्मह्यमपराध्यति ।
यत्तु दन्दह्यते लोकुमदो दुःखाकुरोति माम् ॥ II. 11.

points out that Krsna's army marching to Hastināpura did not transgress the boundary of good conduct while passing by the villages lying on the way (XII. 36). This is solely due to the leadership of Krsna. He is an accomplished archer who takes extremely small targets (eye-balls of the enemies) and hits them (XIX. 99; XX. 18-31) and is so swift in the continuous discharge of the arrows that they appeared as only one long arrow issuing from his celebrated bow at the time of combating with the enemy Śiśupāla (XX. 28). His knowledge and mastery of the mysterious missiles is equally wonderful. With his special missiles, he counter-acts and nullifies all the mystic missiles hurled at him by the enemy king (XX. 38, 58, 71).

His greatness is sung by the sage Nārada (I.31-39), by the Pāndava King Yudhisthira (XIV. 2-5) and by the fearless Bhīsma (XIV. 59-70).

Thus Krsna is nothing else but the incarnation of godhead come down on earth with the specific purpose and associates like Baladeva and the Pāndavas, but Māgha endows the character of Krsna with human touch at few places. His willingness to accept and act according to the advice of the wise and experienced (II. 12), his desire for play (V. 1) and love for nature, the notes of peacocks prompting him for pleasure (VI. 79) and his love and kind regard for each member of the Pāndava family illustrate the point.

Thus Kṛṣṇa is great in emotion, great in knowledge and great in action - all in one, revealing the many-sidedness of his great character. But his strongest point is that those who hated him were as much helped by him in spiritual progress as those who loved him (XIX. 89; XX. 79) and thus proving the truth contained in the well-known verse of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa.[1]

From this delineation of the character of Kṛṣṇa, it appears to us that Māgha has tried to illustrate to some extent the idea contained in the following verse of the Bhāgavata Purāṇa, X.43.17., an excellent illustration of Ullekha Alamkāra:-

मल्लानामशनिर्नृणां नरवरः स्त्रीणां स्मरो मूर्तिमान्।
गोपानां स्वजनोऽसतां क्षितिभुजां शास्ता स्वपित्रोः शिशुः।
मृत्युर्भोजपतेर्विराडविदुषां तत्त्वं परं योगिनां
वृष्णीनां परदेवतेति विदितो रंङ्गं गतः केशवः॥

(2) Śiśupāla:-

Śiśupāla the king of Cedi, the son of Damaghoṣa and Sātvatī is a very powerful force of evil bent on death and destruction if things do not go as he wishes. Even from his childhood, he exhibited his extraordinary physical strength. He combined in himself the characteristic features of Viṣṇu, Śiva and the moon. He had four hands like Viṣṇu, three eyes like Śiva, a face like the full moon (I. 70). In his youth though these features disappear, he is as bright as the sun and overpowers the kings (I. 70). He is Rāvaṇa in disguise (I. 69).

---

1. गोप्यः कामाद् भयात्कंसो द्वेषाच्चैद्यादयो नृपाः।
संबंधाद् वृष्णयो यूयं स्नेहाद् यूयं विभो॥ VII. I. 30.

His voice is as deep as that of the water-bearing cloud (XV, 13), his physique is extremely strong and his shoulders and the thighs are as strong as the peaks of a mountain (XV.6, 10). He is adorned with the crown with jewels (XV. 3) and the armlets of gold (XV. 7). Showing at will favour or dis-favour to gods and demons, he redicules Rāvaṇa and others who attained greatness due to divine favour (I. 71). He is ambitious and oppresses the world through pride of power (I. 72).

His outstanding vice is jealousy which arises in him when others are either honoured or are victorious in a battle or successful in their attempts. To take the last alternative first, he became extremely jealous when Kṛṣṇa married Rukmiṇī and consequently desires to take revenge on him. This old revenge is revived at the time of his combat with Kṛṣṇa on the battle-field (XX. 6). Secondly, he cannot tolerate the heroic deeds done by Kṛṣṇa in the battle (XX. 1) and finally he becomes extremely jealous of Kṛṣṇa when the highest honour is offered to him at the Rājasūya sacrifice (XV. 1). He is fickle-minded by nature (XV. 11) and therefore easily susceptible to the wild feats of anger (XV. 2-11). His jealous, mean, low and proud nature is reflected in his insolent and abusive address to Yudhiṣṭhira (XV. 14-18) where he calls him a liar (XV. 16), to Bhīṣma (XV. 19-21) where he denounces him as the son of river (XV. 21) and to Kṛṣṇa (XV. 22-38) where he showers derogatory names on him and belittles his achievements. Over and above this, he is given to boasting also (XV. 64-66).

His speech (XV. 14-38) shows his knowledge of men and matters and reveals a few other traits of his character. He uses the analogy of the sacrifice in XV. 15 where he equates his allied kings with the burning fire, the unique honour with the oblation and Kṛṣṇa with a dog. He knows fully well that others can be cheated through fraud (XV. 25) and points out that those who incur the sin of killing a cow or of touching an untouchable should be shunned (XV. 35). He enters the field of philosophy when he remarks that the salvation can be attained by giving up the three Guṇas (XV. 32). He is also a good student of psychology and knows how to instigate people by touching them to their quick (XV. 34). His biting sarcasm is seen in XV. 30 and 38. He is gifted with the sense of humour which appears for instance in comparing the honour done to a person devoid of qualifications with the combing of a bald head (XV. 33). His cleverness of speech is evident from his belittling the exploits of Kṛṣṇa (XV. 23, 26-31).

He is seen at his best as the accomplished and perfect warrior and an inspiring general of the army. His skill and prowess in the art of war are displayed when he defeats the most powerful entire Yadava army (XIX. 82). He is perfectly fearless and gives a challenge even to the great Kṛṣṇa for a single combat (XX. 1). He is a splendid archer and his feats of archery are astonishing (XX. 8, 11, 13, 15, 17). He is the master of the mystic missiles, second to Krsna alone and discharges the Sonorous (XX. 32), the Serpent (XX. 41) and the Fire (XX. 59) missiles with skill and and perfection. But his most effective weapon is his speech which

cuts the vitals of those who are opposed to him (XX. 77) and this is responsible for his destruction (XX. 78).

It was enough for Śiśupāla to tie himself strongly with the great soul; viz; Kṛṣṇa even with the bond of hatred. The great Kṛṣṇa did the rest. Here Māgha has the following verse of the Bhagavad Gītā in his mind.

यं यं वापि स्मरन्भावं त्यजत्यन्ते कलेवरम् ।
तं तमेवैति कौन्तेय सदा तद्भावभावितः ॥

VIII. 6.

(3) Nārada:-

Nārada, the celebrated divine sage, is the son of Brahmā (I. 1). He is of the bright white complexion (I. 4), has long yellowish matted hair (I. 5), bears a golden sacred thread (I. 7) and is clad in a dark antelope skin fastened round his waist with a girdle of Muñja grass (I. 6). His inseparable companions are his famous lute called Mahatī and the rosary (I.9).

His scholarship is unique. He is the inexhaustible repository of the Vedas (I. 28) and supra-sensual matters (I.11). But his greater importance lies in another direction. He is the spiritual head and hence a great personality like Kṛṣṇa points out the blessed effect of having his pure sight (I. 28). The words of such a dignitary are bound to be full of wisdom (I.29).

Though he is absolutely free from all desires (I. 30), he ceaselessly strives for the good of the suffering humanity and

therefore visits Kṛṣṇa with the holy mission concerning the welfare of the whole universe (I. 41).

He is proficient in the complete history of the demons Hiraṇyakaśipu (I. 42-47), Rāvaṇa (I. 48-68) and Śiśupāla (I. 69-72) which he narrates to Kṛṣṇa with a view to making him realise the intensity of the alarming situation and impresses upon Kṛṣṇa the immediate necessity of putting an end to the evil incarnate.

He holds that though retribution must come to the wicked as the natural consequence of their sinful deeds, yet righteous persons like Kṛṣṇa ought to become instruments in carrying out the divine law of Karma (I. 73).

(4) Yudhiṣṭhira:-

The Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira is a grand character in the poem. He lives his life strictly according to the scriptural injunctions. He is a man of very strong morals who earns his wealth by honest efforts, augments it carefully and then consigns it to the deserving Brahmins (XIV. 9). Another excellent trait of his character is his regard for his elders which is illustrated by his consulting Bhīṣma regarding the person deserving honour (XIV. 53) and by accepting his advice and acting according to it (XIV. 88).

His religious sentiment is indicated by his performance of the great Rājasūya sacrifice at the conclusion of which he proves himself to be an extremely liberal donor giving alms most generously and indiscriminately to the Brahmins and beggars and

present to kings (XIV. 33-50).

He acquits himself creditably as an ideal host when he does not become angry with Śiśupāla as he was his invited guest although Śiśupāla behaved extremely rudely with him and his friends (XV. 68).

But his crowning virtue is his exemplary friendship and excellent devotion to Krsna. The arrival of Kṛṣṇa to Hastinapura to attend the great sacrifice gives much delight to Yudhiṣṭhira who volunteers himself to drive Kṛṣṇa's chariot to the capital (XIII. 19). His devotion to Kṛṣṇa is again seen in surrendering himself to Kṛṣṇa out of love and seeking his guidance (XIV. 11). His complete dependence on Kṛṣṇa for the protection and the successful completion of the Rājasūya sacrifice points to the same conclusion.

(5) Uddhava:-

He is the disciple of Bṛhaspati and though present only in the second canto influences the entire action of the whole poem. He is therefore an important character guiding the destiny of the two great families of the Yādavas and the Pāṇḍavas. He enjoys such an important position sheerly due to his matchless political wisdom and unique foresight.

He is an eloquent speaker well-versed in the science of politics and possesses excellent power of analysing a question (II. 118), of weighing its pros and cons and using weighty words

(II. 69). Inspite of all this, he is very modest (II. 75, 76) and gives his opinion only when consulted by Krsna (II. 71).

His great political wisdom is reflected in his speech (II. 70-117) where he improves upon Baladeva's proposal of declaring immediate war and points out that it is not martial power alone, but the martial power combined with the well-considered policy brings success to a king (II. 76). He declares that neither heroic spirit not forbearance should be the exclusive policy of an ambitious king (II. 83).

The glorious example of his political foresight is his pointing out the consequence of following the policy of the immediate war with Śiśupāla (II. 102) and his unique power of reading the coming events which is based on his study and application of political science. He points out to Krsna that by following the policy as advocated by him (Uddhava), good results will be attained, viz; when Yudhisthira will pay special respect to Krsna, his fickle and jealous enemies will assume a hostile attitude (II. 115) and the wise kings even though on the side of Śiśupāla will secede their alliance from him (II. 116). It may be noted that this forecast comes true.

Thus Uddhava is the important character who influences the entire action of the poem with his political wisdom and foresight.

(6) Bhīṣma:-

Bhīṣma is another good character in the poem. He is the respectable senior whose advice is sought even by the Pāṇḍava king Yudhiṣṭhira on the important issue regarding the person deserving the highest honour at the Rājasūya sacrifice (XIV. 53) which shows the high esteem in which he is held. Using his learning and the power of discrimination, Bhīṣma proposes that Kṛṣṇa alone deserves such an honour (XIV. 55-58).

His another virtue is his patience. Though Śiśupāla addresses very harsh words to him (XV. 19-21), he does not lose his temper (XV. 45) and remains cool and collected. But he is no longer able to control himself when the demon-king runs down Bhīṣma's ideal of adoration, Kṛṣṇa (XV. 22-38) and his holy anger bursts out (XV. 44) as a result of which he flings a challenge to all the assembled kings (XV. 46). This incidenly shows his fearless nature and heroism.

The best feather in his cap is his devotion to Kṛṣṇa whom he regards as the incarnation of Lord Viṣṇu (XIV. 59). His speech (XIV. 59- 70) is an inspired song of devotion by a god-intoxicated soul.

(७) Baladeva:-

Baladeva, the elder brother of Kṛṣṇa, is equally interested in fine wine (II. 16), war and his wife (II. 14). He is impatient by nature and this is indicated by the fact that he began to give his opinion on the issue as soon as Kṛṣṇa finished his speech although Uddhava being the eldest of them should have naturally spoken first (II. 15).

He is a practical politician who holds that mere theoretical knowledge of politics is of no avail; what is more important in deciding political matters is political acumen (II. 16). Some of his observations are wise and practical e.g. II. 32, 34, 35, 38, 42, 44 and 45. But he does not give full consideration to a question in arriving at a decision. Uddhava points to this trait of Baladeva's character briefly and beautifully when he refers to him as "musala-pāṇi" - having a pestle as his weapon, a warrior only and not a politician (II. 70). Baladeva is for the immediate attack on the enemy (II. 63-65).

We have a glimpse of Baladeva as a warrior in XX. 2-6 where he acquits himself very creditably by inflicting a defeat on Venudāri, the son of Bāṇa and putting him to flight from the battle-field (XX. 6).

Minor Characters:

(1) Sātyaki:-

He is the grand-son of Śini (XVI. 38). He is an intelligent man endowed with the power of eloquence who understands and lays bare the intended meaning hidden in the punning words employed by the envoy of Śiśupāla (XVI. 17-19). His appreciable knowledge of men and matters is revealed in his speech (XVI. 17-37).

(2) The envoy of Śiśupāla:-

This unnamed envoy of Śiśupāla is the character invented by the poet Māgha. He possesses all the requisite qualification of an envoy (XVI. 1) and is clever in employing words having pleasant

and unpleasant meanings at the same time (XVI. 2-15). He is expert in pleading the case of his master and reveals his knowledge of the worldly affairs in XVI. 39-85.

(3) Dāruka:-

He is Kṛṣṇa's trusted charioteer who has the eye for the beautiful natural sceneries. He points out the beauties of the mountain Raivataka to Kṛṣṇa (IV. 18).

(4) Four Pāṇḍava Brothers:-

All the four are forgiving, courteous by nature and understand their duties towards the guests. It was because of this trait that they did not become angry (XV. 68) with Śiśupāla although he behaved extremely rudely with Kṛṣṇa, Yudhiṣṭhira and Bhīṣma.

They love and adore Kṛṣṇa. Bhīṣma attended Kṛṣṇa with Chāmara (XIII. 20), Arjuna held a parosal on Kṛṣṇa's head (XIII. 21) and Sahadeva and Nakula followed him(XIII. 23) when he arrived at Indraprastha.

(5) Pradyumna:-

Pradyumna, the son of Kṛṣṇa is painted as a mighty warrior inflicting a crushing defeat on Śiśupāla's army (XIX. 10-23).

(6) The Pāṇḍava ladies:-

They are only referred to in XIII. 16 where they are painted as ideal hosts happy on account of Kṛṣṇa's arrival in Indraprastha and as receiving and greeting Yadu ladies.

Draupadī is referred to only once (XIV. 22) and that too

not by name. She is represented here (XIV. 22) as performing the great religious sacrifice.

(7) The remaining minor characters are the kings on both the sides, the ladies of Indraprastha (XIII. 31-48), warriors and their ladies. All the ladies are merely mentioned. All these are practically cast in the same mould and hence it becomes difficult to distinguish one king from the other or one warrior from the other or one woman from her sister. The kings on the side of Śiśupāla are Bāṇa, Druma, Bhagadatta, Uttamaujas, Dantavakra, Rukmin, Subal, Āhuki, Kalayavana and Vasu. They lose their temper and express it in their characteristic ways XV. 48-57) when Bhīsma throws a challenge at the assembled kings. A few of them are shown as fighting the duels. They are Veṇudāri (XIX. 1), Druma (XIX. 8), Pṛthu (XIX. 9), Bāṇa (XIX. 14) and Uttamaujas (XIX. 16) who fight with their rivals and lose in the end.

The kings on the side of Kṛṣṇa are Gada, Ulmuka, Yudhājit, Nisadha, Sudhanvan, Āhuki, Pṛthu, Akrūra, Prasenjit, Gavesana, Śini, Śārana and Vidūratha. They, too, like the kings on the side of Śiśupāla, lose their temper (XVII. 1) at the words employed by the envoy of Śiśupāla and express it characteristically (XVII. 3-17).

In short, Nārada motivates the action in the poem, Uddhava influences it and gives it a definite direction, Kṛṣṇa carries it out and the other characters lend excellent support to it. Another thing to be noted in this connection is that Māgha

has not deified his ideal characters nor has he tried ~~to~~ with the help of any fancy to keep them away from being mortals. It is true that ~~that~~ the hero of his poem is god Kṛṣna whom he considers the perfect incarnation of God Viṣṇu. But he has not raised him to a very lofty pedestal far away from the human standards by colouring him with the well-known legends of the Purāṇas or by attributing him divine powers.