

Until the Lions – Q&A with author Karthika Nair

Poet and dance producer/curator, Karthika Nair was born in Kerala and lives in Paris. The idea to retell The Mahabharata from a female perspective first came to her in 2010, followed by the writing and publication of the book Until the Lions in 2015. Having previously worked with Akram Khan's company as the principal scriptwriter of DESH, their award-winning 2011 dance production, they were keen to collaborate again and the result was the breathtaking stage production which premiered in London in 2016.

Nair is also the author of Bearings, a poetry collection and The Honey Hunter/Le Tigre de Miel, a children's book illustrated by Joëlle Jolivet.

Q: When did the Mahabharata first pique your interest? In turn, what first inspired you to write Until the Lions?

A: It would be difficult to pinpoint an exact moment of awareness or interest: the Mahabharata became a part of conscious memory in very early childhood. Like many South Asians, I imbibed it in a variety of ways even before learning to read. As bedtime stories told by parents, grandparents, older cousins or uncles. During all-night kathakali (a form of dance-theatre) performances where gods, demons and heroes - in magnificent costumes and fearsome masks - took centerstage by lamplight and effortlessly owned your attention. Or as TV and cinema adaptations: some very ornate and melodramatic, others much more nuanced explorations of society and religion... Also, through Amar Chitra Katha comics which were among the first 'local' books available for children.

That said, I never thought of writing about it — well, until 2010. The main trigger was the late poet Arun Kolatkar's *Sarpa Satra*, a masterly retelling that views the war and its aftermath through the eyes of the snakes that are massacred in revenge by descendants of victorious kings: the most minor of characters, you could say. *Sarpa Satra* rewired my synapses, I could almost hear the biochemical activity in the brain screech to a halt, and then kickstart to a new rhythm. It was such a brilliant, unflinching and savagely funny gaze at the human race, at our capacity to use morality to commit the worst of crimes. And then the idea began to grow, of reimagining the Mahabharata through nineteen of its most peripheral characters, many of them women, others outcaste soldiers, or wild animals who lose entire clans as a collateral to war or just feats of kingly bravado. The title comes from the igbo proverb Chinua Achebe famously quoted, *Until the Lions have their own historians the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter*. So this was my attempt to let the lions - and lionesses - tell their history in their own voices.

Q: Can you tell us about how this developed into a new project with you and Akram Khan?

A: About halfway through the writing of *Until the Lions: Echoes from the Mahabharata*, I shared some chapters with Farooq Chaudhry, Akram Khan's producer (and co-founder of their company) — someone whose opinion I cherish and with whom I can share ideas, even when they're raw and rather shapeless! Akram and I had already worked together to

conceptualise the narrative of *DESH* together and co-script it (across 2010-11). I also much admire *Gnosis* (his 2010 duet that captured the devotion and dissent between the blind queen Gandhari and her over-ambitious son Duryodhana, central characters of the Mahabharata) so it seemed natural to turn to Akram Khan Company with the idea of giving a performative life to a part of the book.

Farooq responded immediately and unequivocally: he felt Akram should read these chapters, that it would be a tremendous challenge to stage a revisionist approach like this. In fact, AKC was about to adapt the story of Sadako Sasaki (the little girl who died from radiation after the Hiroshima bombing) and the thousand paper cranes as their next company production, but Farooq thought that *Until the Lions* would be a more urgent and organic choice, especially if Akram wanted to return to his stage roots. Of course, the decision was Akram's. We met for a narration, and his choice was instantaneous — Amba was the story he wanted to tell through dance.

You know the story, of course. Amba, princess of Kashi, is abducted from her wedding by Bheeshma, the regent of a neighbouring kingdom to settle a political score. And that one act of violation destroys this woman's life because her betrothed refuses to marry her on her return, as will her abductor, afterwards, citing his vow of celibacy as excuse. She is spurned by society and has to seek refuge (and justice) in the forests. There she invokes the gods, with such passion and fury that they have no choice but to appear because the balance of the universe is threatened by the strength of her prayer.

Both in the original epic and my revisiting, Amba kills herself — after obtaining a boon from the gods that her reborn avatar, once transformed into a man, will become a great warrior and kill Bheeshma. In the original, she is the instrument of his death, because he lays down arms when he sees her (now a transgender warrior called Shikhandi) and his enemies are able to destroy him: so his death is his choice. In my reworking, the ending is a direct confrontation between the two of them, unmediated by any other warrior, where Shikhandi/Amba vanquishes Bheeshma all by her/himself.

Q: What was it about the story of Amba in particular that you thought was relevant for the dance production?

A: A variety of factors, some of which were personal! For one, Akram had toured in Peter Brook's *Mahabharata* as a teenager, you know. The actress who played Amba had been one of his favourite, and most inspiring, performers, from those early years, and he had retained a connection to the story through her rendition of the role.

Then, the fact that it is one of the stories that asks the toughest questions, questions that are - quite literally - embodied, and by that, I mean they are "written on" the body of the protagonist/performer. For instance, what defines gender, what makes us male or female? Is it the body, or an identity bracelet society hands out? How permanent and unchanging are these labels? Why are honour and shame (that of a man, a family, a society) projected onto the body of the woman? Why must she bear these as crosses, even when the

perceived shame is actually someone else's? Where exactly is the fine line between justice and revenge located? When and how does one become the other?

These questions are just as relevant today as ever before with the mass kidnappings of girls by Boko Haram, the sex slaves retained by Daesh, the honour killings in so many parts of Asia (and even among the diaspora) where women are punished with their lives for marrying outside their caste or religion. They are also reflected in the restrictions on birth control in North America or Poland, or the difficulty transgender people face for access to basic human rights. How much agency is a woman allowed over her own body, and through her body, over her life? And what could be more urgent or visceral a medium to refract these questions than dance? And the great advantage with dance is that, with a little thought, it can avoid literalness, and sanctimony.

Q: Can you tell us more about what your role was in the development of the dance work?

A: Well, first of all, the formalities: I got permission from my publishers for Akram Khan Company to use the title, the concept and the specific, first-person perspective of the Amba chapter; the things that make *Until the Lions* an interrogative, feminist 'echo' of the Mahabharata and not the epic itself. Then we homed in on how many characters to retain, and how many could be removed, or represented through just lighting and set design, for instance. I remember, initially Akram and I debated a lot about the presence of Shiva (the god who grants Amba her powers): in kathak, Akram was used to playing many people in the same piece. But this was going to be a group performance, and even if the intent was for a rather abstract retelling through dance, it was important not to crowd the narrative - an unspoken, non-linear one in the adaptation - with too many characters. So we decided there would only be three characters on stage: Amba, Shikhandi (her reincarnated, transgender self) and Bheeshma (played initially by Akram). Shiva would be represented by a mask on stage (which also became a symbol for Bheeshma's vow, his destructively implacable moral code). And Shalva (Amba's betrothed who rejects her after her abduction by Bheeshma) does not have a physical embodiment — in a sense, he is only the instrument who drives them towards each other.

I provided copious character sketches for the principal characters, and also the narrative breakdown into modular chapters to provide not just the sequence of events but the atmosphere. All that was just raw material for the dramaturgy: it was clear from the beginning that it would be a purely kinetic piece, not tanztheater like DESH. So there is no text, except for the excerpts of my Amba poem which are part of the soundscape — they're magnificently voiced as a refrain by Kathryn Hunter.

Q: What is your favourite part of this production?

A: The concluding sequence. I won't divulge the story but everything becomes kinetic in almost alchemical fashion. The set and lighting fuse seamlessly to become a living being, a force of cosmic proportions. The performers move with breathtaking intent and emotional heft: it's a beautiful salute to the power of stillness, of deliberation, in dance. And the chorus's final action is just the most satisfying, fitting end to the revised story.

Q: What have you found has resonated most strongly with Western readers of your book/audiences of Akram's production?

A: Audiences generally leave Akram's production stunned by the visual and kinetic power of the end; many have told me that they are bereft of words. The more literal-minded viewers have lots of questions (which are just as welcome!) because the narrative of the adaptation is what we call "décousu" in French, unstitched. Discussions tend to be less about the narrative and more about the affect, and I believe Akram and dramaturg Ruth Little preferred to highlight those elements of the piece, so it's just as well.

With the book, readers - many unfamiliar with the original epic - speak very often of the timelessness of the stories, of how women - or marginalised people in general, whether soldiers or slaves or peasants - are still facing many of these issues, of lack of agency over their bodies and their destinies, in so many ways. That's the strength of the Mahabharata: like all foundational epics it is concerned with humanity, and transcends time and place. I just highlighted the portions that exist in the interstices, in the parentheses of the large glorious narrative.