



BOOK REVIEW

Devdas Menon (2022) *The Awakening of Nachiketa : Inspired by The Katha Upanishad*, with a Foreword by K B M Nambudiripad, Published by pothi.com, Bengaluru (India), PP. XVIII + 148, Price : unstated

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Every generation can interpret its cultural heritage in the light of its current idioms. We have several versions of the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, the *Holy Bible*, etc. But we do not seem to have many renderings of even important *Upanishads*. Menon has, thus, done a service to all interested in preserving and promoting India's traditional literature.

Awakening of Nachiketa is a landmark work, a new rendering of a well-known classic. Its newness lies in its language and its narrative style. Menon, a professor of Structural Engineering at IIT Madras, here uses the conversational style of an undergraduate tutorial, questions followed by elaborate answers. His earlier book in this genre, *Don't Sleepwalk through Life* has also become very popular.

The story here is simple. A young man tries to draw the attention of his father towards some mistake that the father is making in the course of performing a ritual. The father gets irritated and angry, and curses his son to go to the Lord of Death (LD). LD is away on business, so this young man waits, unattended, at his door steps for three days. On return, LD finds this young Brahmin waiting. Being sorry for this neglect of duty, LD wants to make amends for his lapse. He offers to this young man three boons, one for each day of unattended waiting.

Nachiketa does not ask for any material gifts. He first of all, when returns home, wants his father to accept him like nothing had happened.

Next he wants to know more about fire rituals, etc. Finally, Nachiketa, only 12 years old then, asks for knowledge of soul and the supreme being, etc. LD, at first, tries to dissuade Nachiketa from seeking to know about these things which even great sages have not understood well. But Nachiketa is firm in his resolve and would not be dissuaded from anything. Elephants, horses, fairies, chariots, children, wealth, long life, etc are all subject to death, sooner or later, Nachiketa tells LD. Also because this is a difficult subject not well understood even by sages, he adds, this is a fit place and occasion for him to seek this knowledge from one who is among the very few who understands the mystery of soul and of the supreme being. LD finally relents and begins explaining the structure and all pervasive presence of the soul and of the supreme being.

The story by itself is not so uncommon. There are other *Upanishads*; above all, there is the *Bhagwat Geeta* where Lord Shri Krishna explains this very subject at some length to his friend and follower, Arjuna. Uniqueness and the beauty of this book lies in his audacity to go beyond the text of the *Kathopanishad*. He breaks free of the oral tradition of Sanskrit literature and its compulsion to restrict the number of words to the fewest possible, and the number of syllables to the metrical demand of the composition, made further difficult by the agglutinative nature of Sanskrit language where an entire sentence may appear as a word making it opaque to all expect to the learned. In that

sense, this is a great experiment. Here context is given before, during and after each bit of conversation, which proceeds leisurely through both reflection and observation. The text, thus, can be understood by anyone with even a limited proficiency in English.

Menon has taken the liberty, like a tutorial classroom teacher, to explain a difficult concept in simple words and sentences. LD says,

ask for sons and daughters and grand children who may live a 100 years. Ask for all the good things mortal beings yearn to possess: cattle, elephants, gold and horses. Ask for lands of vast extent, Ask that you may live as many autumns as you wish.

I simply kept quiet. He looked at me curiously and then went on to add, *If this is not enough use your imagination to choose anything else that will give you endless happiness, that will make you rich, learned and famous over a very long time. Be the emperor over regions that extend as far as you can imagine. I shall make you the enjoyer of all these desires – all in just one boon¹.*

Nachiketa reflects.

Any possession in excess of our needs is bound to prove to be an unnecessary burden².

So finally he tells the LD,

O Lord Yama, all the exotic objects of wealth, power and pleasure that you offer are transient in nature and indulging in them weakens and wears away vitality, strength and even morality. All things come to an end not just on earth, but even in

your glorious heavens where you are endowed with greater capacities for enjoyment, more enchanting sense objects and more longevity. But in this perishable universe even the longest life is short and when the end approaches, as it surely will, the fall from heaven is likely to be faced with dread, just as we mortals fear our death. Knowing this which wise person will seek the heavenly delight and longevity that you promise. O Lord, keep your chariots, dance and music for yourself.³

It would be unfair to compare the present book with the original text, the latter was composed for another universe in another medium, in the oral tradition of literature. It must be remembered that the technology of writing is a relatively recent invention in the history of human civilization. But these great books, *Upanaishad* and the *Geeta*, etc., were composed long before, and were meant to be sung in a rhythmical rendering, making it easier for the teacher to pass the text on to his disciples, and for the disciples to take it from their preceptor. But the written text became popular and led to much greater spread of learning because it took the load off the memory of the learner, and gave the power to the learner to learn all and only as much as the learner wanted, even without the preceptor. Written literature brought prose, and broke free of the artificial fetters of prosody.

The newness of the present book lies also in its language. The original text has a terseness typical of India's traditional literature. There Nachiketa tells the LD: "tawa nriyagiitetaewaewawaahaa", i.e. yours are the dance, songs and yours only are the carriers, meaning horses and elephants.

¹P. 29

² P. 29

³ P. 33

But, as it is mentioned above, here Nachiketa explains himself at length.

There is another difference between the two versions. Menon presents the entire story from the point of view of Nachiketa, in an autobiographical, first person narrative, recording both his reflections & observations, and the conversation between the LD and himself. The narrative in the original is from the perspective of the narrator, who may have composed the text. The original spends fewer words on context, and hardly any on reflections. It just describes the event and reports conversation in the fewest possible verses. We should have no difficulty in accepting that Menon's style may make the text more easily accessible to the young scholars of today. *I knew that anything that is born must die*⁴, reflects Nachiketa.

But Menon at times loses this simplicity under the verbal power of Sanskrit. So rather than sticking to his narrative in simple language, sometimes he also lapses into Latinate words of infrequent use that may be understood only by the learned. Many words in the following extract, for example, do not seem unavoidable:

I explained further: *Yes, it is true that wealth provides happiness, for it provides the means to satisfy basic human needs, but such wealth can be earned, and enjoyed by ethical means. But, in the absence of discernment, need turns into greed, and the satisfaction provided by excessive wealth declines rapidly – especially when we see you, O Death-god, hovering around. Of what use is all the effort to gain and hoard wealth when it can no longer be enjoyed, thanks to you?*⁵

It may be noted that even in the past, great books

⁴ P. 25

⁵ P. 34

⁶Indian Classics & Cultural Values– it was a three-credit undergraduate elective.

have been re-told for new readers, We can see the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* by C Rajagopalachari. Beauty of the King's Bible lies not just in the story of the Bible which is, of course, there, but also in its language. Long, rare and Greek-Latin words have been avoided. The new version of the Holy Bible, also known as King's Bible, is presented in the most common words, making the Bible the most widely read non-fiction work in English.

The citation from the book given above could have been done without many words and complex sentences there. It could have been even much more easily written as follows:

Yes, it is true that wealth brings happiness, for it gives the means to meet basic needs, but such wealth can be earned in good ways, and enjoyed. In the absence of telling good from bad, need turns into greed, and the joy brought by more wealth declines soon – more so when you are around, O Death-god! Of what use is all time and effort to gain and hoard wealth when it can no longer be enjoyed, thanks to you!

However, no book should be assessed for what it has not achieved, but for what it has. As a language teacher, I see great potential in it for my class. I used to teach a course⁶ at IIT Madras. *Kathopanishad* was required reading for this course. I wish I had this book then. Language teachers believe that teaching any language is easier with familiar content. This book can be of use to English language teachers as well. It can, of course, add to the attraction of any shelf of books from Indian literature.

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