

GAME THEORY AND FICTION: READING PRADEEP SEBASTIAN'S *THE BOOK HUNTERS OF KATPADI* AS A GAME MATRIX OF FAME

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ABSTRACT

*This paper attempts a game-theoretic reading of Pradeep Sebastian's **The Book Hunters of Katpadi**, dwelling upon the hypothesis that the novel is in the model of a game its characters play, aiming at fame as their ultimate payoff. Fame purports and justifies the decisions they make. Their motives and decisions are the vital components of the plot and action of novel. As the model of the game takes shape across the intersecting timelines of the main characters, fame and reputation prove to be the coveted payoff for all of them. The paper throws light on the strategies adopted by the characters and the cost they decide to pay for the benefits they hope to receive. Unlike in a game, the order of the events is reverted in the novel; the revelation that there is a game matrix involved in how the characters make their moves, shows up at the end of the novel. The readers get to decipher the game and the main players in the last pages, very much in the narrative fashion of a detective novel or a thriller.*

The case for the present study are (a) the motives and decisions of the characters relate pretty well with the moves of players in a game and the strategy they adopt to get their payoff (b) curious themes like the book art, collectors of rare books, the life of the British officers and missionaries in pre-independent India, that are interwoven in the game matrix by the common denominator – fame.

Key Words: game theory and literature, payoff, matrix, information set, equilibrium

Steve J. Brams in his article "Game Theory and Literature" roughly classifies the outcome of applying game theory to novels, short stories, plays etc. as; "While some analyses shed light on

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literary issues, such as the role of rationality of character choices... others highlight game theoretic issues, such as problems of coordinating choices or building reputations when information is incomplete.” (Brams, 1994)

COORDINATING CHOICES

The problem of the present paper is yielded precisely by how the choices made by each character coordinate with those made by the other characters/contesters. Their choices and their motives look uneventful and innocent until the narrative works its way up to the denouement where the choices are discovered to be coordinated choices, adopted to “build reputations”. It’s interesting that Brams’ paper published in 1992 should foreshadow the plot of BHK in its “coordinating choices”, “building reputation” and “incomplete information”.

The novel BHK revolves around five main characters namely Neela and her associate Kayal who run a store, ‘Biblio’ for rare books in Chennai. Nallathambi Whitehead and ‘Arcot’ Manovalan Templar, book collectors and rivals, Kenton Selvaganesan, a school teacher, who claims to be the heir of Sir Richard Francis Burton, the adventurous British officer of the 19th century India, known for his interest in Indian languages and culture, and his translations.

According to his autobiography and biographies, as narrated by the author Pradeep Sebastian Richard Burton comes to India in 1842 as a British Regiment soldier. He was unique in many respects as he took special interest in the culture, ethnography and languages of India:

While the other officers would go off to play billiards or hunt, Burton busied himself with his language lessons, studying for up to twelve hours in a day... He knew the key to getting a staff appointment was through linguistic proficiency. He had been told, more than once, that sensible men who went out to India took one of two lines – they either shot, or studied languages.’ (Sebastian, 2017, 284)

It is his knowledge of Indian languages and his talents for disguise that fetches him the Karachi investigation project. He takes to disguise to test his skill and fluency in speaking the languages he had learnt:

Now he intensified his studies by engaging another Persian scholar – Mirza Dowd. It was around this time that he came up with the idea of disguising himself as a Persian Merchant to get closer to the locals, particularly the older men in the mosques and the women in their harems. He probably considered this an effective way to test his Persian and took the help of his new munshi to dress up and pass off as Mirza Abdullah, the Bushiri. (Sebastian, 2017, p. 291)

In 1844, Richard Burton is appointed by General Napier to investigate the scandalous male brothels in Karachi, rumoured to be catering to British soldiers - an assignment that was to have a lasting impression causing infamy, mystery and scandal around the Burton narratives. Burton investigates the case and submits the Karachi report as an official document to General Napier, he requests the General to destroy the document, after he takes action on it. Facts on the Karachi report get shady after General Napier abolishes all the brothels in Karachi out of which, ‘three catered exclusively to British soldiers’; “As soon as Napier received the report, he went about abolishing the brothels – and then misplaced the report, it seems, or sent it on elsewhere, when he should have destroyed it.” (Sebastian, 2017, 292)

When another general succeeds General Napier, the report creates clandestine ripples about Burton’s involvement and his mode of investigation in the case (as in if Burton himself visited those brothels). Burton’s failing health, on the other hand, deports him to Ooty. This phase of Burton’s life leaves the most ambivalent space (in the plot), giving rise to a lot of speculations on the whereabouts of the report, its contents, the scandalous involvement of Burton, and whether Burton had the report with him when he left Karachi, or he had his own notes on the case that later came to be known as the K Fragment or the holy grail of Burton collectors.

Kenton Selvagesan’s claim that he is Burton’s heir and that he has the Karachi fragment in Burton’s own handwriting sets the game on in the novel. When the papers are sent out for provenance, they are authenticated and the papers are put up for sale at an auction, by Templar’s *Heritage*, Nallathambi wins the auction and becomes the proud owner of the rare Burton manuscript.

Apparently all of it looks make for an euphoric spectacle for Burton collectors, one of whom is rewarded with the ownership of the ‘K Fragment’, Templar’s Heritage, the only book auction company in India becomes a familiar name to the Burton collectors from all over the world, by putting up the most hounded manuscript of Richard, for auction.

There is an undercurrent secret game at play, which gets exposed at the end of the novel; and the entire hunting-game for the K-fragment turns out to be a hoax. It is here that Brams’s “coordinating choices” comes to light. The hoax is played like a game with the choices made by the five main characters, that coordinates with the payoffs expected by every other person involved in the deal.

Kenton Selvaganesan is the key player of the game as he rakes up the forsaken possibilities of finding Burton’s Karachi report, and claims that he has parts of the Karachi report and some of Burton’s letters he had written to his lover and nurse Parvati who took care of him when he was recuperating from an eye infection, in Ooty. The nurse turns out to be Kenton’s ancestor. The fraudulent part of the entire game is that Kenton creates the K fragment using his skill in calligraphy, with the stationery that he discovers in a chest with papers used by British officers in the 1840s. The chest with Burton’s letters to Parvati makes Kenton’s hoax plausible, and the K fragment he prepares, gets passed for the holy grail of Burton collectors and is auctioned for a good sum.

Nallathambi Whitehead agrees to be an accomplice in the hoax because he is ensnared by the prospect of becoming the owner of the Karachi Report. He bids for the K fragment at an unbelievably high price which even international collectors like the Huntington or Pilkington do not consider worth the K Fragment, given the rarity and controversy that surround the Karachi Report and Burton’s involvement in the case. Whitehead bids it for one-and-a-half crores, and he is declared the winner at the auction, at least to the bidders and book collectors from different parts of the globe, he is known as the winner of the K Fragment. But as per the scheme of Templar, Kenton and Whitehead, Kenton gets paid by Templar and Whitehead, for putting up the hoax. Kenton says how their ‘coordinating choices’ had reasons, and worked well for all three of them:

But the three of us had our little reasons. Templar will now get collectors to pay a little more attention to his auction sales. Whitehead has become what he wished most for: The greatest collector of Burton. And I – well, I did it for... I know you're thinking of money. I also did it for my family. I've never been able to take Burton-Parvathy story seriously myself, but it was different for my family, particularly my mother, who had made a fetish out of it and invited the scorn and ridicule of relatives, friends, colleagues and, well, our whole community. This was a way to show those mockers, those skeptics, that it was high time they took my mother seriously. That our family does after all, descend from Sir Richard Francis Burton. (Sebastian, 2017, 389)

INCOMPLETE INFORMATION

The novel is amassed by incomplete information; the master stroke of the novel is founded on the controversy, suspense and thrill that surround the incomplete information on the Karachi Report. Kayal, builds a narrative of his life in India and of the Karachi report by correlating the information she digs up from Burton's biographies or the Burtoniana, by piecing the information she gets from Burton's *Goa, and the Blue Mountains* and pamphlets on Sindh, Gavan Tredoux's *Burtoniana.org.* and Mary S. Lovell's biography.

The game matrix of fame interweaves the available information that is incomplete. The mirazh of fame is actually built upon the possibilities that arise from the liminal spaces between, say, fact and fiction, and fame and greed: of the three documents that Kenton puts up for auction two are authentic, (his books with his hand-written notes along the margins, his letters to nurse Parvati) while the K fragment is fabricated by him; he recovers the papers from Burton's folder, but the ink Kenton uses is not what Burton had used, while Kenton claims that he did it to let the world know of his inheritance from Sir Richard Francis Burton, he also fixes a price to let Nallathambi and Templar get their payoff, out of the hoax.

The two decisive factors that set the players on the game are the ‘coordinating choices’ and ‘incomplete information’ that work together to build the reputation of the stakeholders of the game. Neela and Kayal are bought into the whole drama, when Kayal takes the trip to Ooty to meet Kenton Selvagesan. Kayal discovers that the whole thing could be a hoax, both Kayal and Neela are reassured by the confessions Kenton, Nallathambi and Templar make at the end. However, Neela and Kayal are not out of the game matrix for one simple reason that their bookshop Biblio shares a glory in the revelation and curating of the K-fragment. Hence Neela and Kayal agree to keep the hoax a secret, and get Nallathambi and Templar into a pact, by which the Burton documents shall remain in Biblio’s custody. Neela tells the two Book Hunters of Katpadi; “Let me tell you what we intend to do with the papers. They will remain in Biblio’s custody, under lock and key – to be brought out and held over your heads in the future if we sense or smell some dark bibliophilia is afoot.” (Sebastian, 2017, 410)

Neela also has a confession to make, which reassures the fact that she is very much a player in the game of building reputation as Kenton, Nallathambi and Templar; she takes the fragment from the three male players:

‘As I was listening to all of you,’ said Neela, tucking the folder into her bag, ‘I got to wondering why I hadn’t been more skeptical of the fragment from the start. And I realized it was because I very much wanted the fragment to be a real thing, not for the money or a share in the glory – because Biblio’s role has always been behind the scenes – but to be part of a significant discovery in the antiquarian manuscript and the book world. I guess I’m just as vulnerable as the next bibliophile. (Sebastian, 2017, 410-11)

As a game matrix of fame BHK becomes a theorem of the axioms of game theory with the characters as players, their strategies driving the action, in pursuit of their payoffs, by coordinating their choices and making their moves with the incomplete information they “have”. The moral deviations of each player cancel out those of the other characters, ending up the game as a zero sum game.

The action and plot of the novel correlates specifically with the theory of bargaining, which is an application of game theory, which in turn was initiated by John Nash’s axiomatic approach.

The bargain among the players/stake-holders is resolved by a common agreement in spite of their conflicting interests. All the main players in the hunting came for the antiquarian Karachi report agree over a negotiation; for the prize - fame.

Game theory deals with situations in which people's interests conflict. The people involved may try to resolve the conflict by committing themselves voluntarily to a course of action that is beneficial to all of them. If there is more than one course of action more desirable than disagreement for all individuals and there is conflict over which course of action to pursue then some form of negotiation over how to resolve the conflict is necessary. (Osborne and Rubenstein, 2016, p.117)

Interdisciplinary approach in research is a phenomenon that is gaining grounds of late. The present paper is an attempt to use models of game theory as a tool to analyze the novel *The Book Hunters* of Katpadi. The analysis of decision-making by the protagonists unravels a game model, where the psychological implications of the intentions of each character cuts across the different twists and turns in the novel. There is more room to delve into the psychology behind game theory and its relevance to the study of novels.

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