READING THE *MAHABHARAT*: A STUDY OF SELECT CONTEMPORARY RETELLINGS ACROSS GENRES AND MEDIA

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the
Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY
in
ENGLISH

by

Bithika Gorai
(Roll No. 2K18/PHDHU/503)

Under the Supervision of
Prof Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi
Professor, Department of Humanities
Delhi Technological University

To the Department of Humanities
DELHI TECHNOLOGIAL UNIVERSITY
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)
Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi-110042, India
December 2024

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I extend my heartfelt gratitude to Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi, my Supervisor, for his invaluable guidance and steadfast support throughout my dissertation journey. His insightful critiques at every stage of my research profoundly enriched my understanding of the texts and theories I explored. I deeply appreciate his patience and continuous encouragement.

I also convey my sincere gratitude to Prof Sibaji Bandyopadhay, Prof Laxmi Bandlamudi, Dr Debjani Sengupta, Prof Nand Kumar for their invaluable contributions to my study.

Last but not least, I thank Nishit Gupta, my husband, for always being there to support me during moments of uncertainty. I also express my gratitude to my parents-in-law, Mrs. Asha Gupta and Mr. V.K. Gupta, for always encouraging me to study sincerely, as well as my loving parents, Mrs. Parul Gorai and Mr. Phani Bhusan Gorai, and my elder brother, Bappaditya Gorai, for being the enduring sources of inspiration they have been throughout my journey.

Finally, I thank my "Bunu," my loving sister Lipika Gorai, for laying the foundation for this work. Your presence, even in absentia, makes every moment of my existence, including this journey, meaningful.

Bithika Gorai

Candidate’s Signature

DELHI TECHNOLOGIAL UNIVERSITY

(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)

Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi-110042

CANDIDATE'S DECLARATION

I, **Bithika Gorai**, hereby certify that the work which is being presented in the thesis entitled **"Reading the *Mahabharat*: A Study of Select Contemporary Retellings Across Genres and Media"** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of **Doctor of Philosophy**, submitted in the Department of Humanities, Delhi Technological University is an authentic record of my own work carried out during the period from January 2019 to December 2024 under the supervision of Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi.

The matter presented in the thesis has not been submitted by me for the award of any other degree of this or any other institute.

Candidate's Signature

DELHI TECHNOLOGIAL UNIVERSITY

(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)

Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi-110042

CERTIFICATE BY THE SUPERVISOR

Certified that **Bithika Gorai** (enrolment no. **2K18/PHDHU/503**) has carried out her search work presented in this thesis entitled **"Reading the *Mahabharat*: A Study of Select Contemporary Retellings Across Genres and Media"** for the award of **Doctor of Philosophy** from Department of Humanities, Delhi Technological University, Delhi under my supervision. The thesis embodies results of original work and studies are carried out by the student herself and the contents of the thesis do not form the basis for the award of any other degree to the candidate or to anybody else from this or any other University/ Institution.

Signature

(Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi)

(Professor, Department of Humanities)

(Delhi Technological University)

Date:

Title of the thesis: "Reading the *Mahabharat*: A Study of Select Contemporary Retellings Across Genres and Media"

Name of the Candidate: Bithika Gorai

ABSTRACT

The practice of retelling stories is a phenomenon that has been around for a while. *Mahabharat*, one of the most influential Indian classical texts, has been revisited, retold, and reinterpreted since its inception. The ubiquitousness of Mahabharata retellings has been accompanied by a wealth of critical scholarship. However, significant gaps exist despite its extensive scholarship. In an attempt to fill in the gaps and to help us engage with the epic narrative better, this dissertation titled "Reading the *Mahabharat*: A Study of Select Contemporary Retellings Across Genres and Media" defines the act of reading the epic as dialogue, explains the nature of dialogue (Bakhtinian concept) that occurs when the epic narrative is retold as new narratives in different genres and media; and offers an account of the requisite role of readers'/viewers' active critical participation in the creation of a retelling.

The thesis uses Kisari Mohan Ganguli's prose rendition of the epic *The Mahabharata* as the source text for reference. The primary retellings selected for the study are *Parva* (1994) by S.L. Bhyrappa, *The Pregnant King* (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik, *Epic Retold* (2014), a Twitter narrative (currently known as 'X,' however, for maintaining parity with the secondary critical materials, the word 'Twitter' will be used in the present work) by Chindu Sreedharan, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*, a graphic narrative (2016) by Amruta Patil, a Television series titled *Dharmakshetra* first

aired on the Epic channel (2014-15) and later on the OTT platform Netflix, and a one-act play, also known as *bhan*, titled *The Book of Night: A Moment from the Mahabharata* (2008) by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay. Through an analysis of the six different retold narratives across genres and media and their act of dialoguing with the epic narrative, both inter-textual/and intra-textual, the dissertation establishes how the ancient epic converses with the present through its retellings by engaging with the contemporary concerns and issues and helping us to be better readers, and become better and ethical members in the society.

The project demonstrates that *Mahabharat* can be studied as a potential dialogic text, as it is understood through the lens of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism. The application of dialogic theory here isn't about strictly adhering to its principles. Instead, it is about engaging with the texts in a dialogic spirit. This involves closely reading the texts, fostering dialogues both within and between them, and, crucially, maintaining the friction and tension by not settling on a definitive interpretation. The study follows conversations between the texts, within the text, in different sections reflecting contradictions, oppositions, and contesting viewpoints.

If the Introductory chapter identifies the research gap in understanding the relationship between the epic and the retellings in terms of dialogue, the second chapter provides the theoretical foundation of the work studying the dialogic relation and interaction between the epic and the retellings by introducing Bakhtin's theory of dialogism and a tradition of dialogue deeply ingrained in Indian aesthetics. The third chapter examines the fluid and contextual nature of gender identity in the epic, highlighting how its instability allows retellers to delve into the 'dialogic' selves of

characters from the selected novels and reveal the construction of gender beyond binary roles through diverse and intersecting identities. The fourth chapter explores two distinct genres of Ashwatthama narratives engaging in dialogue within and with the epic, demonstrating how multiple voices get 'refracted' beyond authorial intentions. The fifth chapter involves the 'presentification' of the past through digital media texts, which provides a vast audience reach, demonstrating how retellings are realized through readers and initiating discussions on contemporary global issues. The concluding chapter integrates the issues and arguments highlighted throughout this study, emphasizing the importance of engaging with the past to comprehend the present and improve the future.

Reading the epic and the contemporary retellings across genre and media as dialogue facilitates developing a dialogic understanding of the past and the present, which teaches us what is worth preserving and reviving and what needs correction for a better future. It is essential to realize that engaging in a dialogue with others or a text is not a one-sided experience. The 'other' does not just adapt to us; we, in turn, are also affected by the encounter with the 'other.' In this mutual exchange, our relationship with others can profoundly shape who we are. Readers do not just absorb a story; they grow and develop ethically, becoming more self-reflective in the process of reading. The ethical aspect encourages readers to build a responsible and accountable self based on their relationship with the narrative and others.

Given the constant plurality of approaches and diverse engagement with the *Mahabharat*, the present study intends to capture a possible space for interaction and coexistence of differences. The project of reading the epic through its numerous bodies of retellings is also imperative to reveal its multiple voices with multiple possibilities to be engaged not only in the cultural or ethical universe of India but in the world.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

1. (2023) “Exploring the Ethics of Care with reference to *Ānṛśaṃsya* and *Anukrosa* from the Mahabharata”. *Literary Voice: A Peer-Reviewed Journal of English Studies*. Vol. 1, March 2023. 202-208. ISSN: 2277- 4521. (ESCI) Web of Science .

2. (2022) “*Ahimsa* and *Anrśamsya* Dharma from the *Mahabharata* for a Sustainable Universe”. *Journal of Dharma.* Vol. 47. No. 2, 203-216. ISSN: 0253-7222. Scopus. (AHCI) Web of Science. http://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/issue/view/289

CHAPTERS IN BOOK

1. (2022) Experimenting with Twitter Fiction: a Study with Reference to Epic Retold. *Digitization of Culture Through Technology.* Edited by Deepanjali Mishra and Sasmita Rani Samanta. Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 9781032315478

2. (2021) Exploring the Novelistic Genre in India with Special Reference to Bangla *Mahabharata* narratives in the Medieval Period. In *Conference Proceedings* (International Interdisciplinary Conference on Narratives, Self and Identities: Traditions and Innovations) Eswar Publication, Tamilnadu, India. ISBN: 978-81-931101-8-8

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

If the question is why *Mahabharat* is still being read, retold and revisited, the answer is that the dominant discourses embedded in it are never outdated, and are always topical and contemporary for the readers of the present as well as the past. As long as the narratives of the epic are transitioning from one age to another, making them relevant to the modern perspective, they continue to appeal to the generations of readers. The research introduces some of these modern reimaginings of the 21st century as an attempt to engage in dialogue with the ancient epic to contemporize the epic narrative, redefine the past in the light of the present, and understand and evaluate the present for a better future. These modern reimaginings, presented through plays, fiction, TV programs, and even on social media platforms, highlight that readers in the 21st century remain deeply connected to the significance of the past. The attempt to read the epic through the retellings in the current time brings out engagement at different levels concerning issues of the contemporary world, addressing socio-political and cultural concerns while directing our attention to the inherent plurality of the *Mahabharat* (Mbh as abbreviated).

The Bhartiya tradition is characterized by its flexible approach. The classical Bhartiya philosophical tradition allows ample space for dialogues, questions, and individual interpretations, as it has always been a confluence of cultures, diversities, and divergence in every aspect, from ideas to language to culture to customs, convictions, or faiths. Due to such amalgamations of differences and divergences, this

land has consistently negotiated and coexisted with others and accepted the importance of plurality in consciousness. The act of questioning has been consistently encouraged in Bharatiya tradition, dating back to the time of the Upanishads. In the epic, the narration in the form of dialogue happens at different levels. Moreover, these classical philosophies and literature highly value adaptable interpretations instead of imposing a singular authoritative meaning. The story's manuscript has credibly and consistently increased from 8800 verses in *Jaya* to *Bharata* with 24000 verses to *Mahabharata* in the present shape with 1,00,000 verses. Manuscripts have been found in most parts of the country, from north to south and east to west, in Sanskrit and the vernacular of different lengths with different editions. Most importantly, each of these editions, without competing against one another, has maintained its credibility and acceptance by the people. The *Critical Edition* by Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute of Pune, under the aegis of V.S. Sukthankar Institute, consulted all the editions to create a new one, which proves the flexible and adaptable nature of Indian philosophic and literary tradition. Vivek Debroy, in his talk at JLF 2015, elucidates how traditional narratives intentionally avoid providing a sense of finality, and it is the readers who are left to grapple for closure and bring a sense of finality.

Dialogue and its importance have been integrated and internalized into the Indian intellectual tradition long before the Western world developed dialogue or diversity as a theory. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the land played an essential role in facilitating dialogic encounters between people, cultures, and traditions. Before Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism came into existence, something equivalent or approximate to that idea existed in India. Bhartrhari, the Sanskrit grammarian of the 5th century, explained the dynamic and transformative

nature of language in meaning-making in his book *Vakyapadia*. The dissertation shows that the *Mahabharat* can be read as a text that continuously generates and interrogates new ideas, values, positions, notions, and interpretations with modern and contemporary overtones. A dialogic work continues inter-textual and intra-textual dialogue within the text as well as the other works of art and literature produced before. The dialogic aspect of the epic has allowed and facilitated opening up of a far-reaching and futuristic understanding of the text by allowing conversational encounters between characters, ideas, concepts, times, and traditions. Analyzing the select contemporary retellings of the *Mahabharat* across genres and popular media is a creative venture that can provide the lens to trace broad public debates on issues relevant to a particular community and humankind.

The present work aspires to fill in a significant gap in the studies of the *Mahabharat*. There is no dearth of scholarship on the epic alongside its diverse retellings of evolving meanings and interpretations, encompassing dharma, morality, ethics, and philosophy. However, there is hardly any work studying the dialogic relation and interaction between the epic and the retellings, along with the active participation of readers in bringing out multiple voices and meanings that contribute to promoting discussions and debate on relevant contemporary concerns. Bakhtin's theory of dialogism is used to study western canonical literature as dialogue. It is also interesting as his theoretical argument confers that an epic cannot be dialogic. Bakhtin's argument on epic is mainly based on western epics and its understanding of canonical literature. However, the eastern epics like *Mahabharat* has always been a narrative with potential dialogic attributes.

Due to the heterogeneity of the plot, innumerable digressions, contradictions, incoherence, and amalgamation of voices, the epic has been called 'chaotic,' 'literary monster,' and 'pseudo epic.' However, more recent literary and scholarly works on the epic have described the innate incoherence, heterogeneity, and multiplicity of voices. For example, Doniger calls it "fluid" (1988), Shulman defines it as "open text" (1991) and Van Buitenen recognizes the “fuzzy boundaries” (1973). Doniger writes that "the fluidity of Indian oral/written tradition" reflects the "fluidity of Indian attitudes to all kinds of truth" (64). V.S. Sukthankar, the editor of the *Critical Edition*, used the term 'fluid' in 1933. Terms like fluidity and open-ended heterogeneity are much celebrated in recent discourse, and for the present study, these characteristics help qualify *Mahabharat's* dialogic reading.

Despite its adaptability and the ability to interpret it differently over time, many textual and media representations of the epic face bans or prohibitions. These bans often stem from categorizing the epic as a religious text meant for a specific community or to promote religious and political agendas. For instance, the controversial decision by the Academic Council of Delhi University to remove A.K. Ramanujan's "Three Hundred Ramayanas" and, more recently, Mahashweta Devi's "Dopdi" from the English Honors syllabus sparked significant controversy in academic circles. Such arbitrary decisions, justified by claims of student discomfort or the potential to offend the Hindu community's religious sentiments, as Romila Thapar noted, are not genuine academic choices but are often driven by political motivations. Both these texts challenge the existence of a single authoritative voice, fixed notions, and understanding of the epic. They break away from the stereotypical portrayals of

characters. These instances of restricting academic engagement undermine the vast potential of the epic narrative, which can be seen as a part of world literature. Attempts to homogenize its interpretation ultimately erode its rich diversity, the multitude of ideas it encompasses, and the plurality of voices it represents.

The epic does not advocate a monologic way of seeing life; Monologism refers to a social world in which a hegemonic and unified consciousness controls and curbs the existence of diversity in all spheres. Instead, the epic celebrates diversity and embraces diverse and heterogeneous ideas that coexist, sometimes in opposition, without prioritizing any single idea, norm, or philosophy over others. It celebrates the multiplicity of truths that contribute to its rich tapestry. The narrative breaks from within, challenges and argues against absolute philosophy and single truth. Mbh has always celebrated dialogue and differences of opinions, choice, and free will. Even the most revered god, Krishna, is also not above argument and debate, and he takes his share of responsibility in the war. So, why is it that fragmented episodes or characters from the epic have been used to support discrimination and political and religious violence? The epic should be studied based on contemporary theoretical tools without reducing it to a theological or religious text meant for a specific community. Through such a limited approach and narrow perspectives of reading the epic, temporal political gains may be achieved, but the vast potentiality of the text as a world literature will be compromised.

The thesis attempts to address the following things: a. to define the act of reading the epic as dialogue; b. to understand retellings and elucidate the reason behind using the term ‘retelling’ and explain the nature of dialogue (Bakhtinian concept) that

occurs when the epic narrative is retold as a new narrative; c. to offer the method of reading as dialogue in the subsequent chapters while reading, discussing and evaluating the select retellings, which involved the reader's active critical participation; d. to show how the ancient epic always converses with the present through its retellings by dealing with the contemporary concerns and issues, and finally, e. to help us to be better readers and become better and ethical members in the society.

Scope and Methodology:

"Mahabharata is more than a single text- it is a narrative tradition, a literature" (Tamar 2). The diverse retellings of the Mahabharata should not be viewed as entirely separate works or departures from the original Mahabharata. Additionally, defining the 'original' is highly complex given the numerous layers of texts with their interwoven interpolations and additions over time. Thus, it is more apt to engage in discussions about the Mahabharata tradition rather than focus solely on the specific Mahabharata text. In this thesis, the source text of the Mahabharat used for reference is Kisari Mohan Ganguli's prose rendition of the epic. Ganguli's translation is opted for as it is widely accessible and serves as a prominent reference. Ganguli undertook an extensive and arduous task, accomplishing the translation and subsequent serial publication over thirteen years, spanning from 1883 to 1896. His translation encompasses a comprehensive collection of episodes often cited by retellers in their retellings. Poetry has not been included in the discussion as there is a limited potential for multiple voices found in a poem, and also due to its limited length and the overpowering voice of the poet, the voice of the character or episodes do not get enough opportunity to come out as different or unique from the voice of the poet/writer.

The primary retellings selected for the study are *Parva* (1994) by S.L. Bhyrappa, *The* Pregnant King (2008) by Devdutt Pattanaik, *Epic Retold* (2014), a Twitter (currently known as X) narrative by Chindu Sreedharan, *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers*, a Graphic Narrative (2016) by Amruta Patil, a Television series titled *Dharmakshetra* (2014-15) first aired on the epic channel and later on the OTT platform Netflix, and a one-act play, also known as *bhan*, titled *The Book of Night: A Moment from the Mahabharata* (2008) by Sibaji Bandyopadhaya. The texts were selected based on their unique, volatile, yet intense treatment of these narratives. The act of internal and external dialoguing plays a crucial role in all the selected narratives. They were also selected based on the issues and concerns the subsequent chapters would take up for discussion. All the texts are studied in English or English translations, and subtitles are used for TV production.

Regarding the methodology employed, the study primarily attempts a close textual analysis and performance analysis. The study involves a close reading of the epic, the selected retold texts, and the sections on Bakhtin and Bhratrhari that are relevant for establishing the theoretical framework of the thesis. Wolfgang Iser's reader-response theory has been used to tap into further possibilities in working on the ambiguous and debatable sections of the epic's textual tradition with the help of retellers who are primarily a reader first. The engagement with each retelling is shaped by analysing selected portions of the narratives and the epic. Wherever possible, the study engages with the writers by conducting/reading interviews of the writers of retellings. The use of Bakhtin's dialogism in the present study is not entirely the application of his theory but the readings are done in 'dialogic spirit'- close reading of the texts, opening up dialogues both inter-textual and intra-textual, avoiding seeking

for ultimate meaning by keeping the frictions and tension alive with several other meanings.

Throughout the chapters, there will be constant engagements between the three components- the source narrative, the retold narratives, and the readers in order to understand the interaction/ intersection/ interrelation/ marriage between the past and present, singularity and multiplicity, tradition and modernity, traditional storytelling and digital telling of the story. The primary focus of each chapter is how the retellings have engaged, contested, or dialogued with the source epic narrative and, while doing so, how some particular contemporary issues and concerns have been addressed. Engagement with each retelling is shaped through analysis of selected portions of the narrative. Such selective analysis of the work, however, does not hamper the present study as the work focuses on recognizing the conversational encounter of ideas, voices, positions, and concerns between and within the texts while engaging in dialogue with the new retold narratives.

As the characters in the epic are brought down from the pedestal of legends and myths and efforts are made to see them as human, becoming household names, their ingrained human traits become more visible, acceptable, and relatable to people. The act of moving away from divinity and becoming more associated with the natural and human world opens up space for the new-tellers to fill in as they like. The readers/viewers start accepting and acknowledging the negative or fiendish action while digging deeper into the complexities and motivations behind their action. Thus, engaging with the texts helps to evoke different kinds of ethical conversations that emerge and are extremely pertinent in contemporary times.

Thus, every retold narrative is constituted of multi-directional and multidimensional possibilities. The Reader/reteller's subjective experience, or his/her social, political, and cultural background, plays an important role in constructing and reconstructing new meanings and interpretations through reactions or active responses. The past experience and knowledge become alive in an active reading of the text in the present context while the present attempts to manoeuvre, modify, reinterpret, or revisit its issues from a different lens while engendering regular contemporization of the epic.

This process of contemporization, as articulated by Peter Ronald deSouza in the Foreword to "Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics," involves three fundamental strategies: firstly, employing modern theoretical reading approaches; secondly, humanizing and secularizing the epic; and thirdly, acknowledging and reinterpreting the moral complexities inherent in the epic. The first two strategies are employed in the present study. Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, which deals with language, what and how things in life or in literature are said or sayable in language with its multiplicity, unfinalizability, and flexibility of understanding, is employed as the main theoretical framework of the study.

The reteller, who is also a reader of the epic narrative, engages in dialogue with both the source narrative and the new narrative; they fill into the ambiguous sections, gaps, and silent zones of the epic's narrative with their imaginative potential, often based on their own subjective or even personal experience and expectations of the world. This theory has also been stretched to bring out the ethical responsibility of the

readers, propagated by Martin Buber in "I-Thou"; the reader's encounter with the text and formation of an ethical relation with the text leads to self-formation, self-reflection, and an ethical and responsible relation with others as self (reader) cannot exist without the other (text or other in general).

The epic and the retellings under analysis reflect distinct voices and ideas as understood by Bakhtin that "a voice, … is not just words or ideas strung together: it is a 'semantic position,' a point of view on the world, it is one personality orienting itself among other personalities within a limited field" (Emerson xxxvi). The voices these retellings represent are understood as alternative possibilities of interpretations and alternative positions, ideas, actions, and meanings. These alternative voices and positions interact and engage with the voices in the epic, which foregrounds the dialogic tendency. The select retold narratives consciously or unconsciously foreground the multiple voices and ideas, sometimes by countering dominant voices in the epic, occasionally reinterpreting the silent yet dynamic possibilities and also by highlighting the ambiguities; thus, the inherent dialogic nature of the retellings gets embodied.

Reading the Epic as Dialogue

In Indian philosophy and literature, dialogue is an extremely significant aspect. *Mahabharat's* dialogic framework has been studied by many scholars like Brian Black (2007), Hegarty (2012), and Hiltebeitel (2015). The dialogic aspect within the epic is being studied by Tamar Reich (1998) and Brian Black (2021). Lakshmi Bandlamudi (2018) observes: "Dialogue and dialogic relations characterize the Mahabharata" (216). In this context, dialogue does not limit itself to verbal exchange with another

character or within one's self. It is a complex expression that incorporates the multiple consciousnesses "of the interlocutors, their interaction, the content, the context" (Black 9), and the consequence of interaction, and how each of these components are related for dynamic understanding, contested arguments, and semantic possibilities. The conversations and encounters among the characters, incidents, their views, ideas, comments, and interpretations contribute to initiating significant conversations and questions today. Brian Black observes, "Mahabharata contains genuine disagreements, as well as conflicting philosophical and religious commitments. Throughout the text, opposing doctrines and perspectives are put into sometimes agonistic and unresolved tension with each other… many of the repetitions and contradictions can be seen in terms of competing voices that contribute to lively debates within the text" (15). Moreover, this juxtaposition of heterogeneity, contradictory and contested worldviews of the epic narrative leads to a dialogical relationship with the retellings as they emerge from the flexible textual tradition of the telling, i.e., the *Mahabharat*.

Bandlamudi's (2011) anthropological reading of the *Mahabharat* is one prominent example of a contemporary reading of the epic with the theory of Bakhtin's dialogues. Her study, conducted in 1990 with forty-eight students of Indian origin residing in the United States who having watched four episodes of the TV series titled Mahabharat, directed by Ravi Chopra and produced by B. R. Chopra contributed to their understanding of the text based on their past encounter of the story and also how their understanding has evolved based on their cultural background of the homeland and the contemporary cultural experience in their host land. Although Bandlamudi's work is not a literary study per se, however, her study suggests that the reception, interpretation, and meaning-making of the text largely depends on the

reader/listener/receiver and their subject positions, which the present thesis also argues by considering the authors as readers, or readers in general, including the subject position of the present researcher.

Reading of the epic in relation to the retellings explores the novelistic elements in the epic. As we know that novel is comparatively a new genre while epic is the ancient one, however, the epic narrative has got the traces of novelistic elements as the stories have been reimagined since the Vedic ages in the form oral storytelling like *katha*, *gatha*, *akhayana*, *kissa* etc, reflecting multiple consciousness and plurality of imagination. The cultural and linguistic diversity of the land played an important role in facilitating the dialogic encounters between people, cultures, and traditions.

The *Mahabharat*, translated and transcreated into almost all official Indian and regional languages and English, serves as a dynamic cultural narrative that illuminates its societal context. Despite the availability of different versions of the narrative, the canonical version is hardly read by younger generations. During translation and adaptation into various Indian languages, the original Sanskrit texts have significantly transformed, assimilating local stories, legends, folklore, and cultural beliefs. These regional renditions of the epic hold immense cultural significance, standing on par with the original texts. Interestingly, they enjoy more popularity and wield greater influence over the populace. Across generations, a vast majority of Indians have been captivated by the regional adaptations, with only a few delving into the original Sanskrit versions. The localization of these epics and their widespread popularity has brought out the novelistic elements in the epic. Despite Bakhtin's opposition towards epic for being

monologic and single-voiced, Indian epics like Mbh have displayed and highlighted the novelistic aesthetics, which will be discussed in the following chapters.

Finally, the researcher's own interpretive approach to reading the texts is also essential. As a reader, the researcher is continuously engaged in dialogue with the source narrative, specific retellings, and previous retellings that have developed her understanding of the epic narrative to discuss issues related to gender, ethics, politics, sustainable living, etc. The researcher engages with the epic and the retellings in a living and vibrant dialogue in order to focus on the relevant contemporary questions, discussions and arguments. Such active readings, in turn, bring out the dynamic understanding of the epic and its message. Throughout the chapters, there will be constant engagements between the three components- the source narrative, the retold narratives, and the readers in order to understand the interaction/ intersection/interrelation/ marriage between the past and present, singularity and multiplicity, tradition and modernity, traditional storytelling and digital telling of the story.

Understanding 'Retelling' and Justification Behind Using the Term

Retelling serves as a mechanism to bring transformative shifts, allowing multiple meanings to emerge according to the evolving needs of different eras and contexts. Retellings shake up traditional structures and narratives while bringing about new perspectives, giving rise to diverse forms of strength and expertise that differ from the original texts. A transformation happens when an author retells a narrative; the modification also happens between various retold texts and from author to reader. This transformation emphasizes this ongoing process of change. By revisiting and altering

the source texts, retellings may challenge established narratives, engage with them in dialogues at several levels, resist singularity of meaning, and bring alternative perspectives while facilitating relevant learning from the past. Such purposes are achieved through collaborative creativity, reshaping connections between texts, and presenting multidimensional viewpoints.

Those who embark on retelling the epic-mythic narrative offer their unique interpretations, viewing the 'originals' through their own lenses. They explore the gaps and fissures by revisiting the story, rearranging or resolving loose ends in the 'original' epic like an explorer stepping onto yet-uncharted territories. In this process, the retellers breathe new life into ancient tales. They bring their protagonists to the forefront, allow them to speak for themselves, introduce imaginary incidents, and connect them to the past while tethering them to the glimpses of present reality. they embellish mundane details with vividness and evocativeness, and construct an entirely fresh world within their retellings. This novelistic, poetic, or dramatic atmosphere captivate readers, leaving a profound impact.

A revisionist approach involves reading, reinterpreting, and critically examining a prior text. Any act of retelling has to be preceded by the act of re-reading. This process entails deconstructing the source text to restore, revive, renew, and reframe the prevailing narrative in the light of today so that it can talk about contemporary issues, both local and global. The act of retelling reframes a new narrative to represent the less represented and grants agency, voice, and space to the marginalized that have been previously overlooked in the parent narrative.

A dialogic condition is involved in the process of retelling. Retelling involves a telling, i.e., the predominant narrative and dialogic exchange between and among

various factors/ agents. A newer narrative in the form of a retold text emerges when a conversation based on some specific societal, cultural, or universal crisis or issue needs to be addressed by readers through their critical participation in an earlier narrative. In the retelling process, old texts are revisited, and through intertextuality, authors interweave the past with new threads, revitalizing the narrative. Intertextuality, also known as "textual borrowings" (Miscall 42), reiterates that a text draws from prior notions, practices, and existing texts, resulting in a reconfiguration of the original text. Julia Kristeva, the originator of intertextuality, suggests that a text cannot exist in isolation; it is woven upon a text while referring to another. Kristeva's understanding of intertextuality is derived from Bakhtin's concept of dialogism, where the meanings of words are not fixed and they shift based on context and connotations. For Bakhtin, a dialogical, intertextual, and open text leads to the state of polyphony in which multiple voices can engage and converge in dialogue without the intervention of the authorial stature (David Lodge 86). The present research attempts to establish that this dialogic nature of the narrative (the epic in this context) and its multiple interpretations lead to retelling, rewriting, recreating, revising, and restructuring the existing texts. Thus, a "dynamic interplay and interruption of perspectives is taken to produce new realities and new ways of seeing," resulting in a retelling (Robinson).

Throughout the thesis, Mbh retellings as a work across genres is an act of 'overt dialogue' with the predominant Mbh narrative. The retelling of the Mahabharata through dialogue with the source epic text brings forth a multifaceted and dynamic interplay of voices, perspectives, and discourses. Mikhail Bakhtin, a Russian literary theorist, emphasized the importance of dialogism: the idea that meaning is not fixed; it is constructed through interactions and exchanges between different voices or

utterances. This concept can be applied to the retellings of the *Mahabharat*, one of the most renowned and complex epics in Indian literature. As a classical text, Mbh has been read and reread since the Vedic period, and each reading has resulted in newer retellings offering unique understanding, interpretation, and appreciation. Every reading of the epic opens up new exchanges and encounters with readers because as time, space, culture, and worldviews alter, readers also change. From the classical Vedic period to date in the 21st century, innumerable retellings of the epic have been produced at every age. However, the one thing common in all the retellings is the dialogue of the retold texts with the original narrative. Furthermore, this dialogic encounter continues as new readers with new ideologies look at the epic with newer potentialities. With continuous changes and constant modifications through various renewal mechanisms such as translations, transliterations, abridgments, adaptations, interpretation, and trans-creation, the Mbh narrative is revisited/retold and rewritten, which has never stopped to appeal to the readers across regions, languages, genres, and periods.

Despite so many works that have been produced as retellings of Mbh and different terms being used to describe them, there are no coherent theoretical and structural understandings of why a work is considered retelling. Having touched upon some characteristic differences among these terms, this section discusses why retelling as an umbrella term has been used in the present work instead of getting into the technicalities of each term and their said or unsaid boundaries.

Revisiting is a term often used to delineate the story's narration in different contexts, fill the silences, bridge the gaps, or make other kinds of modifications in the

narrative. Revisioning a piece of literature is another form of retelling. It challenges conventional cultural perspectives and amplifies the voices of marginalized groups, focusing on race, class, and gender, particularly within feminism. These narratives shed light on alternative views that diverge from the prevailing norms. Moreover, by uncovering power dynamics embedded in traditional portrayals, revisionist narratives offer diverse representations and perspectives, providing readers or audiences with a broader understanding of societal norms and conventions. Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni's *The Palace of Illusions* is an example of a revisionist narrative that retells the entire narrative from a woman's point of view (Panchali), elaborating upon her frustrations, passions, and personal experiences in a world in which men mostly dominate. Re-vision is not simply looking back; it has evolved into remaking or reinventing new tradition, a new creation.

Transcreation is another attempt at truthful rendering of the original narrative, keeping the social and cultural context in consideration. The English translation of the epic in verse form by P. Lal is considered a transcreation. Transliterations of epics in all the regional languages of India and later translated into English can be found, and they all include commentaries in the respective languages. Celebrated abridged or condensed versions of the epic in English can be found by M.N. Dutt, Pratap Chandra Roy, Kamala Subramaniam, R.K. Narayan, and Meera Oberoi, C. Rajagopalachari, to name a few.

Engaging in the form of Resonance is another way of retelling while highlighting a particular point or aspect of the epic. Kalidasa's *Sakuntalam* is a celebrated revisit of a substory (*Upakyana*) from the *Adi Parva* in the epic. The reader's

engagement with the original narrative through particular symbols, images, and metaphors and modifying it while maintaining the connection with the main text is pertinent.

Rewriting is another term for reshaping a story of the past from a new perspective. Rewritings fall into two main categories: one that involves adapting a literary model through imitation, pastiche, and allusion, and the other that entails transforming the text using parody, satire, and irony. The existing text is reshaped in both cases, highlighting its relevance to the contemporary socio-political context. The rewritten text is rooted in a contemporary context, and the authors infuse their self-reflective perspective into it, making it more comprehensive and relevant to the present scenario. Adaptation, within the realm of rewriting, encompasses transforming a literary source to fit another genre or medium, driven by a distinct objective. According to M. H. Abrams in An Introduction to the Literary Terms (2005), this adaptation creates a new narrative distinct from the original rendition.

In contrast, translation, also regarded as a form of rewriting, is not merely a linguistic endeavour; it is inherently ideological. Translation involves incorporating the translator's ideology into the text, fundamentally reshaping and generating a new form of writing. Translation, both interlingual and intralingual, contributes to the 'afterlife' of the story, making it a part of a culture, region, and language. The three regional variations (the southern, the northern, and the eastern broadly) of the epic are in no way literal translations of the epic. Later on, the English translations of the epic are also seen as new literary works rather than literal ones. Ayyappa Paniker, in his Introduction to Medieval Indian Literature, opines that "the past was interpreted by the

present, and the present was supported and sustained by the past in these recreated works. Kampan in Tamil, Krittivasa Ojha in Bengali, Sarla Das in Odiya, Ezhuthachan in Malayalam, Tulsi Das in Hindi, Nannaya in Telugu: the names of these rejuvenators are legion" (Paniker Vol. I xxvi).

So many terms for revisiting the Mbh narrative are overwhelming and entangling. Therefore, the term ‘retelling’ will be used in all the following chapters instead of using different terms interchangeably. Also because retelling is "a simple enough word, requires no explanation and suggests the existence of a telling"(Stahlberg 211) which is essential for a dialogue to take place. Retelling emerges from a dialogue with the source narrative, and the newer narrative must be recognized by its readers as a literary/artistic product tied to the main story. Thus, when readers read a retelling, the original narrative must be there in their minds. On the other hand, while reading the old narrative, newer texts remain in mind. Authors/retellers enter the main narrative through silences, gaps, pauses, and ambiguities; they grapple with filling in them or addressing or responding to them through their concerns, which can be societal, cultural, political, local, and global.

Gerald Genette, in his book *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, develops his theory of "hypertextuality," which is defined as "the general notion of a text in the second degree… i.e., a text derived from another preexistent text" (5). Through the process of "imitation" and "transformation," this deriving of one text from another is emphasized. These two categories have been further divided into subcategories on the kind of imitation and transformations occurring in the process. The long list of categories and terms Genette has used certainly sheds light on how a new narrative can retell an old story or an old

narrative 'continues' to be retold, for example, by giving space or cues for future readers to look into, by acquainting the readers with past or background, by filling the gaps and also by showing parallel life events (177).

The term retelling contains almost all the advantages associated with the other terms explored briefly. The term 'Retellings' is suited for the project because it is to 'retell' a 'telling,' in this context, to 'retell' the epic *Mahabharat*. The emphasis upon the prefix "re" refers "to repeat, to return, to appear again- which highlights the presence of multiple 'texts' within one work (rather than a single work changing into another work) [Gravett 33]. What it possibly implies that when a retelling is produced, it carries the traces of all other 'texts'/utterances produced before. A new retold narrative is different from the main narrative. Instead, they continue to be read simultaneously in the reader's mind as they continue to dialogue while shedding light on both.

In the process of afterlives, the canonical text undergo change, transformation, and modification, renewing their stories from various perspectives. Any new work that is based upon Mbh narrative undoubtedly works as a new breath and thus helps in rejuvenating the main story in the minds of contemporary readers by adding fresh perspectives, supplementary agenda, including new characters, developing a latent theme further or bringing a marginal character at the centre. It may also be a long and thoughtful selection, deviation, and deletion process.

Mbh is a living text, always thriving in our social, political, and cultural consciousness. It is a text that is hardly read in its entirety by the readers, and yet its stories have remained alive from generation to generation. A.K. Ramanujan's famous observation that "no Indian ever hears the Mahabharata for the first time," and from

young children to grown-ups to grandparents have some sketchy idea about the popular characters and incidents of the two epics is beyond any doubt (Doniger 134). Readers rarely study the original Vyasa story in Sanskrit; the retellings, newer texts, or works based on the main narrative always grab their attention. The reteller, who is a reader first, in the process of telling his story, engages in a dialogue with his version of the main narrative or an abridged version. Each retelling is different in form, treatment, or style from the other, but they have one thing in common that is they capitalize upon those areas that either remain ambiguous, unanswered, or have a further scope of looking forward in the main narrative and thus engage with the main narrative based on social, political or cultural crisis and relevance and even necessity. While dealing with a past story, the retellings continue to respond to the present explicitly or implicitly, extract meaning from the past relevant to the present, and continue engaging for the future. The ongoing attempt to recreate and retell the epic signifies the desire to uncover the relevance of the past in the present.

Chapter Overview

Chapter 2 deals with the theoretical foundation of the work. It consists of three sections. The first section discusses Bakhtin's theory of dialogism to understand the fluidity between epic and novel and the 'novelization' of genres. The chapter studies the novelistic attributes in the epic, which paves the way for new readers to engage with it productively and meaningfully, facilitating the birth of new narratives. The second part briefly discusses Bhartrhari, a Sanskrit Grammarian from the 5th century. His linguistic philosophy about "*Vac " and* "*sphota*" is introduced to highlight the parallels between Bakhtin's *dialoguing* and Bhartrhari's *languaging* activity in the

creative understanding of meaning. The brief portion intends to establish that though for reading an Indian epic, a Western theory has been used; however, an equivalent or approximation to that idea already existed in Indian aesthetics. Secondly, Bakhtin's dialogic theory is Indianized and contextualized through Bhartrhari's philosophy of language. The third section of the chapter touches upon the theory of close reading with reference to Wolfgang Iser in order to analyze the reader's active role in producing new meanings and also how their social, cultural, and political space and time have impacts when they read or interpret the gaps, silences, and ambiguities in Mbh narrative. In conjunction with that, a theoretical understanding through Martin Buber's *I-Thou* theory is provided about how the process of reading dialogically can help evoke ethical insights and a sense of ethical responsibility in readers.

Chapter 3 is titled 'Plurality in Gender Identities' and discusses the literary fictions *Parva* by S.L. Bhyrappa & *The Pregnant King* by Devdutt Pattanaik. It studies that identity based on gender in the epic is fluid, contextual, and not stable; this instability of gendered identity has rendered enough scope for the Mbh retellers to explore and enter into the minds and selves of these characters, placed in various situations. The multifaceted layers, positions, and voices of these characters have explored their 'dialogical self' "to show how gender is constructed not only through the binary roles of male and female but also through a series of multiple roles within both male and female" (Patton 98). In S.L. Bhyrappa's literary fiction *Parva*, men are not so masculine, women are not so feminine, and the traditionally expected gendered roles are challenged and subverted. Ambiguity in dharma also problematizes the monolithic attitude towards gender. Yuvanashva from *The Pregnant King*, traditionally seen as the epitome of manhood and upholder of rigid gender norms,

undergoes a profound shift, experiencing emotions typically associated with motherhood. Importantly, the novel challenges the conventional binary understanding of gender based on biological birth, showcasing complexities of gender ideologies.

Chapter 4 titled ‘Blurring the Boundaries: The ‘return’ of the ‘villain’’ discusses *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* by Amruta Patil (Graphic narrative) and *The Book of Night* by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay (one-act play *bhan*). It presents a dialogue with the narrative of Ashwathama and his tragic downfall and disappearance from the epic. His narrative becomes the focal point to see the entire epic battle while generating conversation within self, inside and outside as almost no other characters interact in the two select retellings. The purpose of the retellings is to reinterpret Ashwathama’s story in the present with a new lens, in a new light, and keep the conversation, questions, and discontent that was brewing within him for so long-lost years to come out. His character has always intrigued readers and scholars due to its association with terror, revenge, the question of proportionality of justice, and whether he deserves forgiveness. In the play, his meticulous reasoning and logical justifications behind his nocturnal action highlight the deliberate and well-thought-out nature of his decisions. Ashwatthama skillfully combines reason with emotion, invoking his role as a grieving son and duty-bound disciple. Through Ashwatthama's example who was accused of committing genocide without remorse, the chapter warns against the dangers of unchecked revenge and the catastrophic consequences it may unleash.

Chapter 5 deals with *Epic Retold by* Chindu Sreedharan (Twitter narrative) and *Dharmkshetra*, Produced by Vaibhav Modi (a TV Production). ‘Presentification’ involves the process of bringing the past into the present in order to reactivate the past and reconstitute the present. The ‘Tele-epic age’ of today combines technology and

tradition, smoothens the interaction between past and present, popular and classic, tradition and modernity. Digital media facilitates ‘polysemy’ and provides a vast audience reach, interactivity, and multimedia capabilities that traditional storytelling forms often lack. Popular digital media platforms like TV channels and social media platforms, with their wide-reaching impact, have the potential to shape public perceptions and provoke meaningful discussions on topical and relatable contemporary concerns pertaining to consent of women, mental health, ecological concerns, sustainable living and anti-war sentiments. By presenting these issues in a compelling narrative framework, these new adaptations can guide perceptions and inspire individuals to take action in "real-time" in the present on the global level. Interactive engagement from readers/viewers aids in co-creating the narrative and shaping the contours of digital storytelling. This engagement also encourages discussions, interpretations, and the exchange of ideas, transforming the retelling experience into a collective endeavor.

The concluding chapter integrates the issues and arguments highlighted throughout this study. It summarizes the arguments developed across the chapters, emphasizing the importance of engaging with the past to comprehend the present and improve the future. This study is a valuable addition to existing knowledge systems, exploring how interacting with retold narratives in various genres and mediums unveils dialogical aspects of the epic narrative, providing profound insights into the texts. The multi-voiced nature of the *Mahabharat* does not prescribe a singular answer; instead, the study demonstrates that accommodating various perspectives keeps the conversations alive, and the epic narrative continues to remain in a state of perpetual renewal and relevance.

CHAPTER 2

FROM EPIC TO NOVELISTIC CONSCIOUSNESS: A THEORITICAL FRAMEWORK

The previous chapter discussed reading strategies, retelling and its functions, and the components involved in dialogue between the source text and the new narrative. The present chapter delves into Bakhtin's dialogic theory while setting the theoretical framework for the thesis. The chapter will assert that retellings create a new world of narrative on and over the classical Mahabharat narrative to present both the world of past and present for a productive engagement. The engagement of past and present engenders productive dialogue between the two worlds through which both texts evolve and affect one another. The dialogue between retellings and the Mbh narrative is initiated in this context. C. Brantley Craig comments that "To retell a story is to enter into dialogue with it" (100), and this claim can be analyzed with the help of Mikhail Bakhtin's theory of Dialogism. It will also support the hypothesis that the notion of dialogue is pertinent to studying the contemporary retellings of Mahabharat.

The present chapter deals with the theoretical foundation of the work. It consists of three sections. The first section discusses Bakhtin's theory of dialogism with a focus on language/utterance and how dialogic attributes are reflected in the epic, which paves the way for new readers to interact with it for productive and meaningful engagement, facilitating the birth of new narratives. It will be followed by how Bakhtin has differentiated epic and other genres based on novelistic consciousness and the heteroglossic nature of language in novels as a genre. The second part will briefly

discuss Bhartrhari, a Sanskrit Grammarian from the 5th century. His linguistic philosophy about "Vac," or its English counterpart, speech, will be introduced in this chapter to highlight its parallels between Bakhtin's dialogism and Bhartrhari's idea of words/language, its constant evolution in understanding meanings and the importance of communication in generating new meanings. The third section of the chapter touches upon the theory of reading concerning Wolfgang Iser in order to analyze the reader's role in producing new narratives and also how their social, cultural, and political space and time have impacts when they read or interpret the gaps, silences, and ambiguities in Mbh narrative. In conjunction with that, through Mbh retellings, an ethical sense of living for self and others is also generated in readers as a community and in general.

Bakhtin's theory of dialogism has been used to study Western canonical literature as dialogue. However, an attempt has yet to be made to study the epic Mbh and its retellings in relation to dialogue. It is also interesting as Bakhtin's own theoretical argument confers that an epic can not be dialogic. However, Bakhtin's argument on epic is mainly based on Western epics and its understanding of canonical literature. However, Eastern epics and classical literature have different approaches altogether, and that is why Mbh has always been seen as a potentially dialogic text with most of the characteristics Bakhtin has theorized for novelistic discourse.

A methodological issue that may be raised here is that while Bakhtin's dialogic concerns for genres like novel and epic are being used in the context of the West, to use his theory in the context of Eastern epic like *Mahabharat* may not be accurate. As a European scholar and philosopher, it is assumed that his theory and philosophy are

based upon European literary tradition, and his theory of monologism in the context of the Western epic should not be unilaterally applied to study an Eastern epic like Mahabharat. Using the Western theory in reading an Eastern text without considering the nuances of a work may be considered an act of cultural appropriation. Moreover, the term 'epic' was originated in the context of Western works, especially the Iliad and Odyssey (Shubha Pathak 36); therefore, using the term 'epic' as Bakhtin has used in his theory while studying an Indian text which may not necessarily cater to all the characteristics of an epic as understood in the context of Greek epics, maybe a problematic act. To respond to these issues, Shubha Pathak's article may be referred to in which she foregrounded "the features of the Sanskrit works that are analogous to attributes of the Greek ones"(46). Another aspect she has highlighted in her work that is relevant to addressing the methodological problem is that the 'primitive' understanding of the term epic has gradually effaced due to a considerably long time; the term has been used in the Derridian sense, and the semantic domain of the term has been extended "so as to encompass Sanskrit compositions' unique characteristics"(46). Therefore, Bakhtin may have followed the understanding of epic in its 'primitive meaning' without considering the long journey of the term, which includes Sanskrit compositions and the nuances of contexts and cultures of an epic like Mbh. Many works have already been produced in which similarities between Western and Eastern epics have been studied, and the term 'epic' has been used to convey Indian epics like Ramayan and Mahabharat. Having analyzed and explored the problematic categorization, Shubha Pathak continues with the existing categorization and hopes that her analysis can act as a "guide for comparativists to consult before moving across cultures" (53).

Dialogue, upon which the theoretical framework of the present study is based, has multiple implications and understandings in various contexts. The basic understanding of dialogue is the interaction between two or more agents; language continues to live and thrive through dialogic interaction of actors or ideas.

Bakhtin's dialogic phenomenon is complex and defies any single definition, but it can be comprehended in a structured or coherent system found in other normative philosophies. The ambiguities, discontinuities or abstruisity, we encounter in his philosophy are primarily because of the problematic dark time and troubled life Bakhtin had to experience during Stalin's rule in Russia. Despite the gaps, missing manuscripts, and breaks in his philosophical writing, his theory of dialogue is of immense importance in the contemporary globalized world of plurality. As we have already seen, dialogue, to Bakhtin, does not denote only conversation between two individuals; it also includes cognition and human comprehension.

Bakhtin's dialogical theory of language, literature, and truth is based on his reading of Fyodor Dostoevsky's writings. His earlier work, *Problems of Dostoevesky's Poetics*, argues for merging plurality yet independent voices. His theory gets more comprehensive and develops into a theory of literature in his later works, such as *Speech Genres and Other Essays* and *Discourse in the Novel*. One of the most prominent Bakhtin scholars, Michael Holquist, explains Dialogism as founded upon the gap between 'the non-identity of the human mind and the world; the gap, defined by 'indeterminacy' which ensures 'multiplicity and infinite possibility,' the central characteristic of Dialogism. To quote Holquist, "The non-identity of the human mind and the world is the conceptual rock on which dialogism is founded and the source of

all the other levels of non-concurring identity which Bakhtin sees shaping the world and our place in it"(Dialogism: Bakhtin and his World, 2002, 16). He also argues that "dialogism is the name not for dualism, but for a necessary multiplicity in human perception"(21). The ideas like multiplicity, plurality opens up space for infinite possibilities which are fundamental features of Dialogism. Holquist says that Bakhtin insisted upon "differences that cannot be overcome: separateness and simultaneity are basic conditions of (dialogic) existence"(18). Therefore, it is essential to note that a dialogic space looks to retain the tension through the jostling of different voices and perspectives that simultaneously exist and struggle for prominence in the process of meaning-making (Holquist 19). It is a tension-filled interactive space in which multiple utterances in the form of voices with different perspectives participate and contest without forming any hierarchy.

Unlike Ferdinand de Saussure, language is not an abstract linguistics system for Bakhtin. It “lives in the interaction of those who make use of it” (Bakhtin, PDP 183). Bakhtin uses terms like 'words,' 'utterance,' 'discourse,' and 'text' without many nuanced differences. He also emphasizes upon treating language as discourse and defines it as “language in its concrete living reality” (Bakhtin, PDP, 183). For the convenience of the present study, the retold texts will be conceived as utterances. Each utterance as a single unit in the form of text or discourse, represented by the position of a speaker, responds to previous utterances and invites response to the possible future utterances, which is seen as an 'act of responsive understanding' (Bakhtin, Speech and Genres 94) by Bakhtin. Thus, no text or utterance can be seen, produced as an isolated unit, and it 'always calls to mind other words, utterances or texts pertaining to the same theme' (Classens 129).

While further analyzing utterance, Bakhtin says that “two utterances equally and directly oriented toward a referential object” are bound to interact dialogically, without the constraints of authorial intention ensuring the impossibility of reconciliation in interaction and also to maintain the space for further dialoguing, contesting and conflicting. "Two embodied meanings cannot lie side by side like two objects—they must come into inner contact; that is, they must enter into a semantic bond” ranging from confirmation, mutual supplementation to complete contradiction (PDP 188-89). The fundamentally dialogical nature of words (text/utterance, for the present study) and the interactive space that facilitates the meaning-making process is described by Bakhtin as follows:

> The word, directed toward its object, enters a dialogically agitated and tension-filled environment of alien words, value judgments and accents, weaves in and out of complex interrelationships, merges with some, recoils from others, intersects with yet a third group: and all this may crucially shape discourse, may leave a trace in all its semantic layers, may complicate its expression and influence its entire stylistic profile (Bakhtin, DIN 276).

The exclusive categorization of epic as monologic/single-voiced discourse is problematic and, to a large extent, contradicts Bakhtin's theory of language as he argues that language is essentially dialogic and, therefore, every literary discourse that conceives an understanding and meaning through language can be studied as dialogic.

Secondly, the authorial consciousness, which exercises control from the outside over the meaning of an entire text, has been questioned. There is enough emphasis on authors compared to the readers in Bakhtin's theory (Green, Mikhael

Bakhtin, 33, 62). However, his theory also argues that if the author has created the text, the readers are responsible for recreating it, renewing it, and populating it with newer meanings and voices and thus equally collaborating in the 'authoring' process and recreating the world represented in the text (DI 253). The importance of the reader gets more emphasized as the words/utterances of the author are constantly in a dialogic relation with the hearing of the readers or listeners who have their own ideologies and worldviews. So, the encounter is not just between words or utterances that are 'replete with a host of words within the word' but also between ideologies and worldviews that are soaked in those words and utterances. Bakhtin says in "The Problem of Text in Linguistics, Philology, and other Humanistic Sciences":

> The word (any sign in general) is transindividual. Everything said or expressed lies outside the "soul" of the speaker and does not belong to him…. The author has his inalienable rights to the word, but his rights are also the listener's right; his rights are the rights of those whose voices resound in the word offered by the author"(EST 300-301)

In light of this, the reader's active role is emphasized in recognizing the 'dialogical overtones' in words and utterances, engaging in constant dialogue with the text while reading, and also responding to the utterances in the text in ways such as 'agreement,' 'disagreement,' 'sympathy,' 'objection,' 'execution,' while creating new meanings in the process.

Third, Bakhtin's notion of "great time" as the "infinite and unfinalized dialogue in which no meaning dies" (Bakhtin, Speech Genres, 69,125) can be referred to establish that the great works of the past can be "enriched with new meanings, new

significance" and thus continue to live in the distant future as if "these works outgrow what they were in the epoch of their creation." In this context, Bakhtin cites the example of Shakespeare and argues that he "has grown because of that which actually has been and continues to be found in his works, but which he neither himself nor his contemporaries could consciously perceive and evaluate in the context of the culture of their epoch" (Speech Genres, 169). The greatness of their work is revealed in a great time (4-5) because of the dialogical nature of language, which is based on the dialogue of words, utterances, texts with other words, texts, and utterances. Bakhtin argues:

> There is neither a first nor a last word, and there are no limits to the dialogic context (it extends into the boundless past and the boundless future). Even past meanings that is, those born in the dialogue of past centuries, can never be stable (finalized, ended once and for all)-they will always change (be renewed) in the process of subsequent, future development of the dialogue. At any moment in the development of the dialogue, there are immense, boundless masses of forgotten contextual meanings. However, at certain moments of the dialogue's subsequent development along the way, they are recalled and invigorated in renewed form (in a new context). Nothing is absolutely dead: every meaning will have its homecoming. (SG 170)

Again, the readers, the third-person observers, who observe this dialogue participate in the meaning-making processes. It is natural that as readers in every age, time, and space vary, the dialogues they observe and respond to are bound to be different. The exchange of dialogue between the text and the reader in the context of foreign culture, unfamiliar positions, and different perspectives enriches both. In the

process of encounter, new meanings and questions emerge (Morson&Emerson289/SG 7). Bakhtin argues that "a meaning reveals its depths once it has encountered and come into contact with another, foreign meaning. (SG 7)".

Finally, openendedness or unfinalizable character of dialogue is worth considering. The association of dialogic discourse in a text with openendedness, indeterminacy and otherness reflects the potentiality of a third meaning, a position different from any given meaning. The space, created through this constant interaction, is potent for unfinalized, unrealized meanings, open to discussion and newer possibilities (Patterson 135). New voices, utterances, and texts constantly get 'recalled' and 'added' to the dialogue, thus creating a long chain of utterances ranging from the beginning of history to the present to the anticipated future utterances. (Bakhtin, "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky's Book," 293; Morson and Emerson, Mikhail Bakhtin, 60, 24). A new utterance 'lives and takes shape' in an environment of dialogized heteroglossia. In the words of Bakhtin, it "is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction (PDP 110)."

Despite a solid hegemonic view of considering the epic Mbh as a Hindu religious text focusing on Hindu religious ideas, worldviews, practices, and ways of life, a vast work of modern critical scholarships on Mbh has perceived it as not monologic because it does not follow the characteristics of a monologic discourse. The evidence of contradiction, repetition, ambiguity, and multiple perspectives have established the heterogeneity of Mbh, and most importantly, it cannot be studied as a 'product of a single consciousness.' There is no single author by whom meaning is

controlled or identified throughout the text. A plurality of voices can be identified, which remains unmerged. A series of unmerged voices are created through narrators, human characters, divine entities, and ideas. Dialogical dimension can be asserted as 'they are answered, echoed, nuanced, parodied, and placed in new relationships with other ideas' (Newsom 297).

For Bakhtin, language is 'multivoiced'; it contains various layers of understanding from society, history, and world views. Therefore, meaning /comprehension is also 'dialogically constituted' against the backdrop of the discourses of time and space. Readers belonging to diverse social and cultural backgrounds and traditions are the participants in the dialogue, along with the interaction of their social and cultural worldviews. Each culture and society has unique notions and characteristics, which are primarily different from other societies; therefore, any culture's inner dialogicity is different and bound to move across time and space. As Bakhtin says, such dialogic interaction is always 'openended' and 'unfinalizable' without any sense of stagnation because it moves across time and space. He asserts that language has more than one or at least two voices and that the readers can recognize these voices and their expressions and meanings in the text. The author may or may not have used a word in a specific context; it is the readers who can recognize a new meaning to it and use it in a new context, reflecting 'someone else's semantic position, as the representative of another person's utterance"(PDP 184). Thus, word becomes a zone of conflict/a 'site of struggle' between two opposing voices and meanings. It is 'eternally mobile… transfer(ing) from one mouth to another, from one context to another context, from one social collective to another, from one generation to another generation. In this process, the word does not forget its own path and cannot

completely free itself from the power of these concrete contexts into which it has entered"(PDP 202). It means that the trace of all possible dialogic interactions is carried on in a word, and when we encounter a word, it always carries 'álien' voices and meanings within it.

Novelistic Discourse and the Retellings

Now, let us understand why Mbh retellings can primarily cater to the characteristics of 'novelistic discourse,' especially as being 'double voiced' and 'dialogized' discourse. It has already been discussed that Mbh retellings are always seen as works that engage in a dialogue with the Main narrative as a form of response or answer or filling the gaps, sorting ambiguities, highlighting a particular aspect, bringing fresh perspectives, etc. Thus, these new texts, Gary Saul Morson argues, carry a version of the original utterance as the embodiment of its speaker's (author's) point of view … and the second speaker's evaluation of that utterance from a different point of view"(65) Therefore, these new narratives are "born in a dialogue as a living rejoinder within it; the word (text, in this context) is shaped in dialogic interaction with an alien word (the main narrative) that is already in the object" (new stories) (DI 279). The original Mbh text in whatever form is the 'alien word' in the contemporary works or retellings; they emerge and shape the words as a way of response to the 'alien' words, what Bakhtin calls a 'living rejoinder,' always and already there situated and engaged in dialogic interaction in the works of the contemporary author. When a new work in the form of a novel or story converses with the supposedly original narrative or a particular aspect or layers of it, what it includes is his understanding or cognition of the text and the past and simultaneously making it relevant to the contemporary readers

by tapping into its innumerable possibilities. The retellings are relevant to us because, through them, we come across the past dialoguing with the present through contemporary polyphonic genres like novels while opening it up for future readers. Morson views these texts as 'a special sort of palimpsest' that the readers can experience while reading them.

The present study tries to establish that the retellings of Mbh emerge not just for a creative urge on the part of the readers/authors/ listeners; instead, they emerge as a result of dialogized discourse between various aspects like two different worlds, worldviews, languages, genres, words, meanings. Bakhtin has posited how languages cohabit and "today's and yesterday's socio-ideological and political "day" do not, in a certain sense, share the same language"(DI 291), and they continue to 'intersect each other in a variety of ways, forming new socially typifying "languages" (DI 291). All these languages, which are 'unique' and are 'characterized by their own objects, meanings and values' and hold 'specific points of view on the world,' can be 'interrelated dialogically' through juxtaposition, mutual supplementation, and contradiction (292). Bakhtin argues that they "co-exist in the creative consciousness of (real) people who write novels"(292). Thus, a novel becomes the site of a 'social heteroglossia' constructed through different languages. A novelist becomes instrumental in bringing them together 'for the orchestration of his themes and for the refracted (indirect) expression of his intentions and values'(292).

Bakhtin's theory of dialogized language asserts that since language is always populated with intention, consciousness, and 'heteroglot worldviews' of others, there cannot be neutral words or forms. So, the word in a language is not anyone's 'private

property' even if it is appropriated, adapted, contextualized, and serves one's intention; it will always be 'half someone else's,' which we will share with others. The new narratives in the form of retellings also encapsulate this idea of sharing with 'someone else', in this context, it is Mbh narrative. The retellings have at least two utterances (texts) or more than two: the classical Mbh narrative and the other post-classical or later regional Mbh narratives and the contemporary story. As we may be aware, it is always about the understanding of the reader that determines the meanings in the Mbh narrative, and that is why every individual understanding of the narrative can provide a new 'text' in the form of a retelling which can carry on with the conversation not just with the so-called original text but also regional texts.

To sum up, dialogue is essential in understanding the retellings of Mbh. Unlike a monologue, dialogue ensures the presence of voices, utterances, or texts (for my study); a contemporary retelling contains several 'words' or 'utterances' of others. It contains Mbh narrative in whatever form, and through their interaction, conversation, and dialogue, new narratives emerge that carry the traces of the past and simultaneously address the present and open up and look forward to the future.

Distinction between the Epic and the Novel

The section must emphasize the distinction Bakhtin draws between the two genres and why such distinctions are problematic, citing Bakhtin's own argument. Mbh, one of the greatest Indian epics, does not follow an epic's monologic principles, as Bakhtin theorized. While analyzing this section, we can also answer the dialogic principles inherent in the epic. These principles are fundamentally associated with the novels as the young genre. According to Bakhtin, the three main characteristics of the

epic as a genre are: "(1) a national epic past … serves as the subject for the epic; (2) national tradition (not personal experience and the free thought that grows out of it) serves as the source for the epic; (3) an absolute epic distance separates the epic world from contemporary reality (DI 13). He elaborates his conception of the epic world as "a world of "beginnings" and "peak times" in the national history, a world of fathers and of founders of families, a world of "firsts" and "bests" " (13). He also claims that "the epic past is absolute and complete. It is as closed as a circle; inside it everything is finished, already over. There is no place in the epic world for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy…it suffices unto itself, neither supposing any continuation nor requiring it"(16).

Bakhtin's emphasis on the epic's reliance on 'national tradition' as its source and its isolation from 'personal experience,' 'new insights, from any personal initiative in understanding and interpreting, from new points of view and evaluations'(17) belittles the possibility of any distinctive reading of the epic. Defining the epic genre as traditional, 'sacred and sacrosanct,' 'demanding a pious attitude towards itself' hinders the possibility of its multiple readings and plurality of interpretations as if any reading of the epic or any other approach towards the epic must not ignore its sacred tradition of reverence. There is an immense gap between the time of the actual happenings of the narrative and the time of its composition and reception (14-16). The third characteristic of epic as a genre of the distant past, complete in itself, "exists not only in epic material, that is, in the events and the heroes described, but also in the point of view and evaluation one assumes towards them"(17), Bakhtin claims, and thus, a justified supremacy is conferred to the epic in comparison to the other available approaches.

In order to challenge the monologic discourse of the epic by the dialogic conception, we need to understand the meaning of the monologic conception that the epic as a genre is believed to demonstrate. The Epic, for Bakhtin, presents a monologic discourse, and the three defining characteristics of this are the absolute presence of a single authorial consciousness in an epic, its tendency to gravitate towards a system or unity, and the third aspect is its finalizability of the words and meaning. According to him, "Monologism, at its extreme, denies the existence outside itself of another consciousness with equal rights and equal responsibilities"(PDP 292), which implies a sort of oppression or subjugation of otherness. On the other hand, the novel as a genre emerges as a result of 'rupture in the history of European civilization,' "from a socially isolated and culturally deaf semi-patriarchal society, and its entrance into international and interlingual contacts and relationships" (DI 11), can challenge the monologic aspect of the novel. Bakhtin calls the novel 'the only developing genre which "reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively and rapidly, reality itself in the process of its unfolding"(DI 7). As a genre of the new world, the novel can capture the evolving multiple realities, meanings and relationships in a world of 'multitude of different languages, cultures and times" (DI 11).

Tzvetan Todorov describes Mikhail Bakhtin as "the twentieth Century's greatest theoretician of literature" (7), and his "full acknowledgment of and participation in a Great Dialogue" (Booth xxv) in literature and especially in novels is his ultimate contribution. Bakhtin points out the three fundamental characteristics of the novel that differentiate it from the other genres: (1) its stylistic three-dimensionality, which is linked with the multi-languaged consciousness realized in the novel; (2) the radical change it effects in the temporal coordinates of the literary image;

(3) the new zone opened by the novel for structuring literary images, namely, the zone of maximal contact with the present (with contemporary reality) in all its openendedness (DI 11).

The novel is the only developing genre; therefore, it reflects more deeply, more essentially, more sensitively, and rapidly reality in its unfolding. The novel has become the leading hero in the drama of literary development in our time precisely because it, best of all, reflects the tendencies of a new world still in the making … the only genre born of this new world and in total affinity with it …. In the process of becoming the dominant genre, the novel sparks the renovation of all other genres. It infects them with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness (DI 7).

Thus, a space where multiple consciousnesses represented by multiple forms of language intersect is created by novels. Another vital aspect to be noted here is that the novel 'infects' all other genres; the dialogic attributes Bakhtin is talking about are not limited to the novel only. Instead, it implies that such novelistic attributes 'with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness' can also be found in the reading of other genres. A particular genre by itself may not necessarily be dialogic; for example, novels in which authorial consciousness only dominates can be monologic; on the other hand, reading of a traditionally monologic text can also be read as dialogic as long as other unmerged voices can be found in the language and utterance of the text.

The other two characteristics, associated with the thematic and structural features of the novel, are equally pertinent in subverting the stable traditional literary image of the closed past world, as defined by the epic. The undisputed image of the past and defined nature of meaning are challenged by the novel's ever-constructing,

incomplete literary images, which continuously rethink and reevaluate the present. This radical transformation from the closedness of epic imagery to openness in the novel is liberating and emancipatory. The third characteristic refers to the contact zone where the stable, lofty worldviews of the heroic past meet the new worldview and compete with them. In that process, the monologic worldview is challenged and dismantled.

From the above discussion, it may be clear that Bakhtin clearly distinguishes between the epic and the novel as two exclusive categories, and epic cannot be novelized because epic "had already been accorded a canonical position as the predominant literary mode of an abstractly conceived unitary language"(Renfrew 108) and therefore, lacks the dialogic nature of the novel. However, such oversimplified exclusion contradicts Bakhtin's own argument, which he makes in *Forms of Time and of the Chronotope of the Novel*. Bakhtin discusses that every text is a product of its time and space, and their relation to the text determines their genre; this implies that different chronotropes have dominated at different times in literature in representing events, ideas, and concepts (FTC 84-5). Thus, he dismantles boundaries between literature and 'life,' 'the world,' or the social or ideological environment in which a literary genre has developed.

Romila Thapar, in her work Sakuntala: Texts, Readings, Histories, discusses how the story of Sakuntala has been retold from Kalidasa to now. Her argument that reimagining the story brings new elements reflects the historical time and space in which it is produced. Therefore, time and socio-cultural space are responsible for modifications in how Sakuntala's character was imagined based on the socio-cultural

ideologies of the time. The work by Thapar is important to mention because it shows that each retelling of Sakuntala's story is produced against the backdrop of/in the socio-cultural, historical context of the age. Therefore, the retellings produced in different genres are also products of time, place, thinking, and other necessary attributes of the age and reflect the concerns and ideologies of the time.

Moreover, Bakhtin, through his dialogic theory, has conceived a 'novelistic' genre according to which the novel being 'novelistic' becomes a synonym to dialogic; he also seems to have introduced a 'generic principle' which allows 'novelization' of all other literary genres "founded on receptivity to 'becoming' and dialogized heteroglossia, (that) threatens to displace not only the system of the genre that has both sustained and struggled with the very idea of the novel but also the 'novel' itself (Renfrew 149-50). Therefore, to claim that the epic is monologic and, therefore, far apart from the novel, which is dialogic, is a problematic argument. The reason why the distinction is being analyzed is not to project Mbh as a monologic text and the contemporary retellings, especially the novels, are dialogic; instead, the present study argues that Mbh narrative, even though it belongs to the genre called epic, is potentially dialogic. Moreover, because of Mbh's dialogic nature, multiple voices and contesting ideas emerge, coexist, and interrogate in various forms of engagement with the ancient classical world through retellings. These new tellings in novels, plays, or TV productions revisit the Mbh narrative, explore the unexplored or less explored, and create space for those voices to register.

The dialogic encounter, which is a tripartite relation according to Bakhtin, referring to a relation between three: the utterance, the response, and the relation

between the two, is constantly happening as the author, who is also a reader first, set in his time and space reads the story and enters into the main narrative through silences, pauses, ambiguities, populates it with his own opinions, views, and perception of the world, participates in a productive dialogue which sheds light to the main text and also help revaluing the Mbh retellings through critical participation of the readers.

Dialogism in the Context of Theatre and Plays

Bakhtin has hardly used theatre in his discussion. The way a novel is different from an epic, in the same vein, he has referred to that theatre cannot be studied as dialogic. Both epic and theatre are placed in the same monologic category and are different from the dialogic nature of the novel. Bakhtin says:

> The internal Dialogism of authentic prose discourse, which grows organically out of a stratified and heteroglot language, cannot fundamentally be dramatized or dramatically resolved (brought to an authentic end); it cannot ultimately be fitted into the frame of any manifest dialogue, into the frame of a mere conversation between persons; it is not ultimately divisible into verbal exchanges possessing precisely marked boundaries. (DI 326).

So, what it means is that theatre cannot be studied as dialogue, which is a predominant characteristic in the novel. However, this issue can be addressed through Bakhtin's dialogic theory, in which he argues that novels as the 'young' and 'organically receptive' genre directly impact the literary genres (Kalugampitiya 40). In those eras when novel emerged as the 'dominant genre,' infecting other genres 'with its spirit of process and inconclusiveness' (DI 7), "All literature is then caught up in the process of "becoming," and in a special kind of "generic criticism"(DI 5) and during those

times "almost all the remaining genres are to a greater or lesser extent 'novelized'"(5). 'Novelization' is defined by Bakhtin as:

> They [the other genres] become more accessible and flexible, their language renews itself by incorporating extra-literary heteroglossia and the "novelistic" layers of literary language, they become dialogized, permeated with laughter, irony, humor, elements of self-parody and finally—this is the most important thing— the novel inserts into these other genres an indeterminacy, a certain semantic openendedness, a living contact with unfinished, still-evolving contemporary reality (the open-ended present).(Epic and Novel 7)

From the above discussion, it may be asserted again that novelization does not confine itself to a particular genre; rather, it is an approach that has the potential to force the other genres to 'revisit' their supposedly determinant and fixed position and help them discover dialogic dimension.

Lakshmi Bandlamudi argues:

> the epic/novel distinction breaks down in ancient cultures like India, yet at the same time we cannot assume a merger between the epic and novel either. What we see in the Indian scene is the alternating process of novelization and canonization in interpreting epic texts because they are living, open-ended texts. Furthermore, multiple temporalities coexist in the culture and the heterochronous reality is captured in the popular expression that epic texts in India are as modern as they are ancient"(Gradskova & Chakrabarty, 50).

Bandlamudi says that Bakhtin challenges the "notions of what constitutes 'original,' 'alien,' 'ancient,' and 'modern.' The monologic worldview conveniently freezes these fluid concepts simply to exert control, and Bakhtinian categories enable us expose the built-in-rigidity in single –voiced authoritarian worldviews"(Gradskova and Chakrabarty, 51).

Novelistic Elements in the Epic

Firstly, Heterogeneity in the Manuscripts: The immensity and vastness of the epic are evident as it has more than 100,000 couplets and is 'about ten times the length of the Iliad and the Odyssey put together.' Various manuscripts are found in all parts of the country, along with commentaries and slight or significant modifications from each other. Innumerable retellings have been produced following manuscripts of different regions in Sanskrit or vernaculars, including English. The works are produced across genres and mediums and are popular with the audience. Without knowing the Sanskrit language, most Indians are familiar with the epic and its stories layered and weaved together. A critical tradition has been structured by Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute of Pune under the aegis of V.S. Sukthankar, which collects all the manuscripts and goes through a process of selection and deletion based on the majority of the manuscripts. Apart from the Critical Edition, there are the Calcutta Edition and Bombay Edition, the Kumbhakonam Edition, and others. Both Western and Eastern scholars have accepted that 'heterogeneity is integral to the Mahabharata.'

Secondly, Multiplicity of Author(s)/narrator(s): There is no single author or narrator of the text. The Sanskrit composition is attributed to the great legendary Krishna Dwaipayana Vyasa. However, no text is narrated by Vyasa as an 'author';

instead, he is always in the background, hovering over the narrative and entering as an active participant at different crucial junctures. Vyasa's composition of *Jaya* to his fellow disciples is the shortest version. He is not the narrator in any of the two significant recitations. His involvement in the text is very complex; he is 'the progenitor' of the Kuru line, their spiritual guide on crucial occasions. The first narration occurred at the snake sacrifice of Janmejaya when the sage Vaisampayana recited it to King Parikshit's son, Janmejaya, as a response to the latter's questions. This narration structures the main frame of Mbh; there is an outer frame in which another recitation took place by a bard called Ugrasravas to a gathering during Saunaka's satra or twelve-year sacrificial session at Naimisa forest. Ugrasava, the Suta, was an auditor of the sage Vaisampayana's recitation at Janmejaya's sacrifice. While Vyasa's *Jaya* version has 10000 verses, Vaisampayana's *Bharata* version has 24000 verses, and Ugrasava's *Mahabharata* version has 100,000 verses. Since the recitation follows an oral tradition of face-to-face recitation, the 'tale keeps on swelling,' from one narrator to another, generation after generation'(Mehta 101). The textual tradition became popularized with the involvement of Western literary scholars, and soon, it became a text to be read, interpreted, and analyzed (Mehta101). However, the story of Vyasa's text composition through Ganesha can support the claim of existing textual tradition.

Moreover, the existing masses of manuscripts do not subscribe to the observation that Mbh is mainly an oral text. There must have been oral composition, and the tradition of oral performance still happens in many parts of India and South Asia. Oral tradition techniques have also been infused into the written parts and impacted production. Therefore, claiming that Mbh is strictly oral or written text will

be 'absurd'; instead, techniques of orality and writing are woven together in a complex composition (Tamar 27). The textual tradition of Mbh supports Vyasa, who plays the role of an author who remains present in the first recitation, asserting his presence and simultaneously letting it proliferate and circulate across generations.

Third, heterogeneity in genres and doctrines: it is such a long narrative that the narrative is bound to be complicated and full of digressions. The supposedly dominant narrative of the war between two sides of the same Kuru family is populated by innumerable side narratives. Some of these narratives have farfetched connections with the main story, along with philosophical, legal, ethical, and cosmological discourse. Upakhyanas are weaved together, coexist, and enrich each other without a dominant discourse. While the side discourses and side narratives are in a variety of genres like parables, folklores, riddles, and stories, and all of these can independently exist and continue to be read as separate stories or discourses, the whole narrative is presented in the form of 'box within the box' conversations, a series of questions and answers.

In the context of fluidity, McKim Marriot, while distinguishing from the Western concept of rigid boundaries, asserts that the fluidity in South Asian thought processes and other entities are constantly in flux, engaging and exchanging with other standpoints and thus, always in the process of becoming (1976, 1977). V.S. Sukthankar, the editor of the *Critical Edition*, used the term 'fluid' in 1933. The terms like fluidity, openendedness and heterogeneity are much celebrated in recent discourse, and for the present study, the terms help to qualify the dialogic reading of the Mbh. It has no single author, no single authorial intention or dominance, no single point of

composition, no single manuscripts, no dominating doctrines, ambivalence in philosophy, 'emboxed frames' of narration, always in the process of expansion with multiple beginning and multiple endings, and becoming a new narrative with a new reality, perspective, and approach. All these aspects of the text make it a perfect match to have Bakhtin's dialogic characteristics.

Efforts have been made to establish a traditional approach to the textual tradition of Mbh. The present study will not delve into establishing a textual tradition. However, it was necessary to establish national unity or a unified national consciousness, a requirement for establishing a unified nation. Sukhthankar, in his article published in 1936 by Annals of Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute, calls "our Mahabharata, the great epic of Bharatavarsha"(76) to establish a pan-Indian identity replacing the regional or sectarian identities that might fragment a nation. However, the efforts to 'unify' the multiplicity of manuscript tradition into a text following Euro-centric literary standards are problematic. Mbh scholar Madeleine Biardeau, while telling us about the mere impossibility of constructing a single text of Mbh, comments:

> The editors (BORI) up till now have concentrated on the reconstruction of a single text out of the several known recensions, but it is recognized by everybody, including the editors themselves, that such a text never existed. It never represented the actual beliefs of any particular group, nor could it claim to stand for the minimum common beliefs of the Hindus. (123)

The constant tension between the efforts of establishing a supposed unity and the inherent multiplicity of manuscript tradition remains unresolved as Sukthankar

writes in the Prolegomena, "If the epic is to be a vital force in the life of any progressive people, it must be a slow changing book" (1933, ci). Also, he comments that the *Critical Edition* is only a ‘static representation of a constantly changing epic text’ (1933, cii). With the variety of voices and representation of different people with different aspirations and socio-cultural backgrounds living in a country like India, where inclusion is to be celebrated, the epic becomes an appropriate site for dialogic encounters for contesting voices. The centripetal forces or the unifying monologic forces constantly conflict with the centrifugal forces that enable dialogic encounters, revealing the discourse's heterogeneity and heteroglossia (1981, 270-275).

When we speak of Mbh as a text, it cannot be exclusive, prioritizing over oral or regional recensions; rather, it is an inclusive text that embeds different other versions, including oral/folk traditions. All the variations have their significance, 'fitting into the whole' without being dominated by a dominant voice or tradition. All the meanings are equally pertinent and can be discovered and rediscovered with the change of time and space. Since it was composed over a long period through multiple authors/narrators, intertwining the oral/writing tradition, different voices, ideologies, meanings, and realities have juxtaposed and initiated a dialogical or competing relationship between them. In the true sense, the text becomes a site of a 'battlefield' contesting with other voices, meanings, and discourses in the Bakhtinian sense. Reading it based on 'core'/'peripheral,' 'original'/'subsidiary,' dominant/weak, or self/other will lead to a misreading.

Dialogue between Bhartrhari and Bakhtin

Our land, Bharat, has always been a confluence of cultures, diversities, and divergence in every aspect, from ideas to language to culture to customs, convictions, or faiths. Due to such amalgamations of differences and divergences, this land has consistently negotiated and coexisted with others and accepted the importance of plurality in consciousness and understanding things. Dialogue and its importance must have been integrated and internalized into the Indian intellectual tradition long before the Western world developed dialogue or diversity as a theory. However, it would be erroneous to assume that diversity will automatically lead to dialogue because the dogmas in every culture tend to create monologic impulses.

Though the present work is based on the theoretical framework of Bakhtin's dialogue, the core idea of plurality, flexibility, versatility, multi-dimensionality, and unfinalizability of words and their inexhaustible meanings has some equivalence in Bhartrhari's philosophy of language. Long before Bakhtin, a Sanskrit Grammarian Bhartrhari shared a remarkable interest in language in action. There are similarities and dissimilarities in their understanding of language. However, both Bhartrhari and Bakhtin appreciated language's dynamic and transformative nature and the role of diversity, contrast, and the encounter with the unfamiliar in generating new creative insights, meanings, and understandings. In the 20th century, Bakhtin emphasized that creative understanding of language and the process of meaning-making arises when competing and contrasting ideas meet, especially when they encounter foreign ideas. Bhartrhari, who lived nearly 1500 years earlier in the 5th century, recognized the importance of ruptures in time and space for creative activity. He noted that the intellect of language gains acumen through exposure and engagement with different and new traditions (VP II, 484). Bhartrhari's work *Vakyapadia*, which literally means

"sentence-word," deals with the philosophical discussion on language and "the activity of "languaging" as a social practice" (Bandlamudi 570). Despite the far apart time and space between these two philosophers, they are connected by the act of listening and understanding the vibrations of language which are produced through human interactions in society; creative interpretation and meaning-making happen at the threshold of interaction with contrasting or competing traditions or ideas: "Bakhtin heard the voices of consciousness, and Bhartrhari felt the vibrations of consciousness in linguistic transactions"(Bandlamudi 570. Both considered human beings as subjects capable of thinking, feeling, understanding, and transacting activities, which were defined as ‘languaging’ activity by Bhartrhari and ‘dialoguing’ activity by Bakhtin.

For Bakhtin, life becomes meaningful through constant language transactions carried out by people in different times and spaces; for Bhartrhari, it is a search for an ultimate cosmological understanding. In Bandlamudi's observation, Bhartrhari tells us that without language, human beings are reduced to lifeless stone or wood, while Bakhtin tells us that in language, stone, and wood are brought to life. To understand the relationship between language and its role in presenting reality, Bhartrhari talks about Brahman, which means absolute truth; Metaphysically and etymologically, it means "growth, expansion, evolution, development, swelling of the spirit or soul"(Monier-Williams M. Sanskrit English Dictionary). *Vac*, which is a loose equivalence for word/language, is more complex, for *vac* is not singular. Since vac/word is the essence of Brahman, it also shares the same attributes. Words have the creative power to assume different forms and expand their meanings due to many factors, such as other words, speakers, listeners, history, culture, and context. Words bring enlightenment, and enlightenment brings salvation through myriad forms and

shades of words. In short, words carry multiple meanings, dynamic meanings at the forefront, while dormant meanings get revived at some time.

Unlike Bhartrhari in the Indian intellectual tradition, whose sole purpose was to understand the absolute truth or Brahman, the Western philosopher and linguist like Ferdinand de Saussure considered language as a structural system based on binaries and dichotomies. However, Bakhtin objected to this and defined his theory of dialogue based on a dynamic system of interaction or 'living dialogue' achieved through myriad transactions, compromises, and contestations between human beings in different times and spaces, similar to Bhartrhari. Both Bakhtin and Bhartrhari locate the source of meaning-making through words in the social realm; the meaning-bearing unit of language materializes through human interaction, a concept articulated by Bhartrhari as "*sphota*," "a tactile metaphor to explain the feel or force of emerging meanings"(Bandlamudi 571). The word etymologically derives from *sphut*, which means " "to burst," and therefore, when words touch other words or other's words, the friction causes manifested meanings in language to spring forth" (571). However, this *sphota* or vibration of meaning cannot be captured without *vyavahara* (Bhartrhari, 437) or communication (437) and also if the listener does not actively participate in a communication (Lipari, 504-523). Bakhtin also says something similar that meanings emerge "on the boundary between two consciousnesses"(Bakhtin, Speech Genres and Other Late Essays, 106).

What is important to note in the present context is that the two scholars centuries apart focused on and understood the importance of the presence of others, other words, situations, and sentences. Also, contextual, kinetic, and unique

differences have roles in creating new understandings of things or meanings in life or in literature. Both strongly believed that the exact words or utterances can have different meanings for different people at a specific time, culture, and historical space. Both of them believed in the ethical responsibility of words/speech/utterances to understand the past and histories associated with utterances so that they can be engaged to transform or revive cultural trends. Despite certain similarities, Bakhtin focused more on what is said in language and how multiple voices can be heard in utterances.

Readers in Reading/Retelling

Readers' critical and active participation plays an essential role in making these multiple voices thrive in the present through retellings of Mbh. The concerns of the present time are not directly addressed in Mbh; rather, these issues can be indirectly addressed and interacted with by new readers/authors through telling and retellings. All the available critical editions, adaptations, collations, translations, and transcreations in different languages are some form of "retellings" in response to changing climates of opinions and to new questions posed by the present-day reader (Mehta 101-2). Because the contesting voices are constantly engaged in establishing their hegemony, it becomes a prerequisite for readers to engage with those voices while working on the social, cultural, and ecological crisis the society may be going through. Each version has something new to offer, and when a new writer takes up the project of retelling the story, his work engages in a dialogic relation not only with the past but also with the future. Bakhtin's criticism of epic as monologic, as opposed to dialogic text, is based on the scheme that other voices get stifled by a dominant voice or ideology. It does not apply to a work like Mbh, which, in its inception, is based on

plurality and multiplicity of voices, truths, and realities without one dominating over the other. A vital dialogic feature is embedded in the Mbh, which is why each retelling of it can capture new voices in it, and it remains perennially new or *'saswata'* as used by Sri Aurobindo, an ever-evolving text, always new.

The role of readers is essential in actualizing retellings. The readers' active participation in reading the Mbh narrative and engaging with it in dialogue through a newer narrative leads to its materialization. Bakhtin has not directly dealt with the role of readers in his corpus of theories; nevertheless, he made numerous references to readers and their active participation in the meaning-making process, which could be studied with reference to other reader-oriented theories. In Bakhtin's discourse, terms like reader, listener, and understander are interchangeably used. Moreover, a reader is an active participant in understanding the dialogic dimension in an utterance as opposed to a passive listener.

Bakhtin's idea of the reader and other theories of readers have striking similarities. Allon White considers Dialogism as 'a kind of reader-oriented self-consciousness' which has certain similarities 'to the effect created in discourse by the 'implicit reader' spoken of by Wolfgang Iser' (128, 129). Iser's theoretical framework about readers who participate in the text reinforces the idea that the retellings of Mbh also require active and critical participation from readers, which leads to the recognition of dialogue between the new telling and the Mbh narrative. As we have discussed earlier, a re-telling is formed when a reader meaningfully engages with a text; it initiates a reciprocal relationship between the text and the reader. The new telling sheds more light on an old text by addressing the moments of silence,

ambiguities, and ambivalence based on the reader/author's understanding and experience of the perceived situation and his/her social/political/cultural vulnerabilities, making it new and relevant to contemporary time; the process of reading and engaging with the text also helps to evoke an ethical insight, a sense of ethical responsibility in readers (Judith Butler, Adam Zachary Newton).

What is the role of a reader in a text? What is the relationship between the two in the context of Mbh retellings, as a retelling cannot exist without the active participation of readers? If a text can only reflect a prestructured singular meaning, the retellings would not have existed, and the role of readers would have been to accept it without any question. But this is not the case. Iser claims that a text becomes a dynamic entity only through the participation of readers when a text is 'read,' 'examined,' and 'studied' and thereby become 'collaborators' and 'accomplish' in a text's 'artistic communication.' He writes, "Active participation is fundamental to the novel; the title of the present collection sums it up with the term 'implied reader.' This term incorporates both the prestructuring of the potential meaning by the text and the reader's actualization of this potential through the reading process" (Iser, 1974, xii). Iser clarifies the 'active' role and participation of the 'implied reader' in the reading process, which discovers the hidden potentialities of a text. In other words, with the readers' 'active' participation, a text's latent potentialities will come to fruition. While asserting the most crucial role of readers in constituting the meanings of a text, Stanley Fish also argues the role of the 'interpretive community' of readers who share similar values and mental makeup in formulating the meaning of a text. The author's intention in the text's initial structuring is important. However, ultimately, the readers participate

in a conversation with the text from their own position as an outsider, respond to the text, and create new meanings.

Iser's theory is predominantly about prose fiction or fiction, but it is useful in the context of epic retellings because, in the retellings, the readers and the act of reading play the most crucial role. In order to analyze the importance of readers/audience/ listeners, the present study goes beyond Iser's theory and uses Bakhtin's notion of reading as a dialogic activity between the reader and the text; also, it is the readers who trace 'the marks of its (a text) past historical engagements…as well as being open to recontextualization' (Shepherd 98). This act of recontextualization, for Bakhtin, along with the readers' position and situatedness in the socio-historical milieu, plays the most crucial role in carrying out the dialogic relationship between the text and the readers.

In the case of Mbh retellings, the new teller reads the dynamic text of Mbh or gets to know/familiarized with the later narratives of Mbh, different layers of this dynamic narrative, engages with it, responds to it, and creates a new narrative. So, for Mbh retellings, active participation of readers with the supposedly original or main narrative is mandatory for retellings to exist. Iser's argument that "One text is potentially capable of several different realizations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential, for each individual reader will fill in the gaps in his own way, thereby excluding the various other possibilities; as he reads, he will make his own decision as to how the gap is to be filled" (280) is very pertinent in actualizing the full potentialities of a text. Readers, as individuals or as community members, may have several possibilities, and Mbh, as a dynamic text, has always seen continuous evolution. This

evolution of a text or narrative may not always be 'áctual,' but rather 'potential,' and readers can fulfil these potentialities in different ways through their responses. Mbh narrative or the textual tradition of Mbh provides a 'primary frame' for the readers to work upon, and it is the readers who explain the relationship with the retold narrative by working upon their imagination to fill in the gaps, silences, ambiguities, multiple narrations, perspectives found in the main narrative.

Iser also posits various strategies through which a reader can be influenced to approach a novel and use his imagination to release the potentialities of meanings in a work. Iser cites Wayne Booth's *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, which discusses "various devices: disclosure, partial disclosure, concealment, direction of intention, evocation of suspense, introduction of the unexpected—these are all means of stimulating a specific reaction in the reader" (Iser 58). These strategies can also be found in Mbh retellings. Apart from that, in the case of Mbh retellings, a vast number of retellings have been produced by readers/authors based on their personal experience of the past or present, a relatable connection with socio-economic-cultural vulnerabilities of situations or characters, reader's gender, sexual, racial, ethnic orientation. Different variables may work upon the reader and his/her position in a time and space which will direct his/her response to a text.

The active role of readers and the text as a dynamic entity leads to a relationship of encounter. To elaborate more upon the context of retelling and Bakhtin's dialogue, Martin Buber's *I-Thou* theory (1970). may be referred. The work of Buber inspired Bakhtin himself. Buber's work generally talks about encounters between humans. However, a Buber scholar, Steven Kepnes, analyzed it in a different light, “that a work

of art can be viewed as a *Thou* and that an individual can have an *I-Thou* relationship with it" (Kepnes 22). Kepness extends Buber's theory by including art and text. Kepnes may have read it in the context of a relationship between an interpreter or critic and his *I-Thou* relationship with the text. We can refer to retelling in this context. Thus, a reader's I-Thou relationship with the retelling is established in not just interpreting it but in the face-to-face encounter with the text, i.e., in 'the very act of reading'(Tamar 187). Kepness argues that during this encounter, "we open our senses to it (text), to its particularities and to its total gestalt. We allow it to move us, to confront us, to speak to us. We try to perceive its special message and disclosure of reality. And we also respond to it. We present our reactions, we mirror back our reading and look to see if the work confirms it" (Kepnes 25). He further continues, "Art calls out to the interpreter. It beckons the interpreter to respond. When the interpreter responds, the work takes on life; it becomes a 'Thou,' and a dialogue is initiated" (26).

Based on Kepnes's above argument, an "I-Thou" relationship is initiated between the reader and the text as the reader approaches a text with all the senses to engage with it effectively. In the course of the engagement, both the reader and the text open, confront, speak, and respond to each other, while the setting facilitates a dialogue between them to move or to be moved.

A dialogic encounter with the other (the texts in this context) is never one dimensional, which means the 'other' changes itself according to 'I,' rather in the process of encountering the 'Thou', 'I' also gets encountered, or in other words, the relation with 'Thou' can have a profound impact on 'I' and even 'I' becomes 'I' thorough his relation with 'Thou'. This notion can be further extended with the help of Judith

Butler's work *Giving an Account of Oneself* (2005), in which she argues how our 'account' of ourselves is based on our response to others. Butler's theory is based on persons and how ethical and responsible self may emerge in relationships with other humans. In the context of retellings, the reader, in their encounter with the text, equally grows, develops their ethical self, introspects, and perhaps becomes a self-reflective self. The ethical aspect also prompts us to grow a responsible self in readers based on our relationship with others and the retellings in this context. Therefore, the readers develop or continue to develop their ethical, responsible, and accountable selves as they face, confront, interact, and respond to a narrative and what they create, read, or experience in the form of retellings.

Encounters with Mbh retellings have immense potential to make readers accountable, responsible, and ethical in various dimensions. This is necessary at a time when the world and human society are experiencing unprecedented crises, such as war, terrorism, ecological crises, and others. The retellings can initiate dialogue about important issues like gender, identity, justice, caring, forgiveness, and sustainability that are universally relevant today.

CHAPTER 3

PLURALITY IN GENDER IDENTITIES

The purpose of this chapter is to show that gender and gendered identities in the epic and in the retellings are not singular or fixed as reflected in the Mbh retellings in which the reteller/author/resistant reader engages with the grand epic in dialogue, exposes multiple voices and positions of a self/character and how these multiple selves cannot be defined with fixed gendered identities. Both men and women, through their several positions and multiple layered characteristics voices, have exhibited the dialogic nature of their characters. Therefore, assessing these characters as masculine or feminine will be erroneous. Following Bakhtin's theory of dialogism, it will be explained that identity-based on gender in Mbh is fluid, contextual, and not unstable; this instability of gendered identity has rendered enough scope for the Mbh retellers to explore and enter into the minds and selves of these characters, placed in various situations. The multifaceted layers, positions, and voices of these characters have explored their 'dialogical self' "to show the ways in which gender is constructed not only through the binary roles of male and female but also through a series of multiple roles within both male and female repertoires. … the dialogical gendered self is a multiple self, with a variety of momentary roles to choose from" (Patton 98). And such dialogic characteristics of these selves have encouraged the retellers to enter into a dialogue with the characters and explore various perspectives of these characters and situations.

The chapter begins with a brief review of literature on the dominant discourse on gender identities in Mbh and its retellings, which have mostly emphasized upon studying it in terms of binary, simultaneously reflecting the assertion and resistance of female characters in the new retold texts, giving a solid impression to the readers that Mbh is a gendered text, focusing on man's interest and celebrating patriarchy and manhood. There is no doubt that Mbh has celebrated masculinity, heroism (*virta),* and male child, but the text is in no way a celebration of hegemonic masculinity. In this chapter, as a reader of the epic and its retellings, the researcher will concentrate upon how the dominant discourse on gender and gendered identities have been interrogated and revisited in the light of Bakhtin's dialogic theory which promotes the idea of 'dialogic self' and in turn, study gender as flexible, unstable and 'performative' according to the change of time, age, positions, and situations. Before proceeding to the concerned Mbh retellings in terms of gender ambiguity, the chapter will touch upon how the epic itself, despite veneration of *putra* and manliness or masculinity (*virta*/ *paurush*), has never propagated an idea of hegemonic masculinity and all the central characters, both male and female, have exhibited and revealed multiple selves in different contexts. The next part of the chapter aims to study the tentative nature of gender with reference to two Mbh retellings, *Parva* and *The Pregnant King.* The analysis of the novels, which follows in the next section, focuses on the significant ways in which the novels interact with the epic narrative in terms of provisionality and non conformity of dominant gender discourse and how different characters, male, female, and transgender have reflected dialogical selves in different positions, thus problematizing the concept of gender as a fixed subject. The novels capture the conventional understanding and expected roles of the characters in terms of their

biological sex and gendered social expectations; however, by entering into the mind space of the characters in *Parva* through the stream of consciousness technique, the retold narrative refract the dialogic selves of the characters with multiple voices and positions, while echoing specific conventional power dynamics and equally contradicting it.

The Pregnant King captures the voices of characters that do not fall under the heteronormative gender discourse. Being marginalized and not defined by normative sexuality, the central character experiences confusion and ambiguity in terms of his identity. He does not conform to the gender norms and also transgresses the normative binary of male/ female and masculinity/femininity, reflecting the fluidity in terms of gender and sexuality. The idea which will be developing in the chapter is that gender is not associated with one's being born as a male or a female, or in other words, a self is not gendered by its biological birth as a male or female, it is born at dynamic moments or situations as self interacts or engages with other-selves within or outside, a gender is born in those moments.

Analysis in the context

Patton argues in the article "How do you conduct yourself?" that "while we are perfectly willing to admit Yudhistir's multiple dharmas as a king and a husband, or Arjuna as a warrior and beloved cousin, we frequently still choose the singular theme, rather than the plural when we conduct our studies" (97). Treating gender as a singular category has always been a popular practice by feminist scholars. However, recent studies done by Judith Butler turn its attention from gendered identities to performative genders. Most of the scholarly work done on gender in Mbh has focused on, as Patton

says 'single ideology' while ignoring the multiple positions and voices, that are yet to be heard. Feminist studies have been done on individual women characters and how they have been subjugated by patriarchy or how they have subverted and resisted patriarchy. A.S. Altekar's *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1938, second edition 1959*)* glorifies women's status in ancient India. Shalini Shah on *Gender Relations in the Mahabharata* (1992) is an anthropological study of how culture and customs have asserted gender roles in ancient Indian society. Arti Dhand in *Women as Fire and Sexual Ideology* has focused on women's sexual ideology and their multiple roles while conforming to didactic and ethical purpose to maintain in the societal fabric. On the other hand, a vast territory of scholarly works has explored the patriarchy, kingship, Kshatriya masculinity, and warrior aspect in the Mbh. Such studies have helped shape the gender relations and gender identities in the epic but with a binary approach.

The recent studies on Mbh have approached the text from various selective parts, focusing on specific characters or a group of it, reworking on a particular *parvan*, sub-stories/ *Upakhayanas*, idea and philosophy oriented studies etc. These studies, with a microscopic approach to the Mbh, help the epic venture into new lights for further literary and critical assessment. Most of the character-focused studies have concentrated on exploring gender and sexuality-related issues, which is very much fashionable nowadays in literary scholarships. There are innumerable stories focusing on characters, article-length critical works produced from a gender perspective, and especially the feminist approach to reevaluating both the women and male characters to establish the epic's masculine approach and the patriarchal universe. These studies

focus on the stereotyped portrayal of female characters, their lack of true agency, and their intellectual presence hijacked in a male-dominated, male-authored text. A lot of creative and critical works are produced on female characters like Draupadi, Sulbha, Savitri, Satyavati; a substantial amount of work can also be found on Krishna, Arjuna, Yudhistir, Duryodhan, and even Bhima from different perspectives; almost no study is conducted to explore the multifaceted and ambivalent nature of a self and its erroneous gendered identities, depicted in the epic; the reason for that may be because of a limited study of masculinity in gender studies for a long time in the critical domain and also because of the seemingly uncontested and prominent androcentric universe of the epic.

Before we proceed further, a basic understanding of gender and sex needs to be established, considering the frequent use of gender in social and literary discourse. David Glover and Cora Kaplan's comment in this regard is apt: "'Gender' is now one of the busiest, most restless terms in the English language, a word that crops up everywhere, yet whose uses seem to be forever changing, always on the move, producing new and often surprising inflections of meanings" (ix). In feminist studies, gender has been used in opposition to sex, in the same way as culture is understood in opposition to nature. If sex is understood as biological, the understanding of gender is related to one's social and cultural identity; if sex determines one as male or female, gender is what makes one masculine or feminine according to which the role, responsibility, conduct, social and cultural norms applied to the person becomes different. If sex being biological makes it a universal phenomenon, gender is specific to one's social and cultural context and, therefore, is subjected to change. Feminist scholars like Kate Millet argue that "male and female are really two cultures and their

life experiences are utterly different" (1972, 31). However, the impact of psychoanalysis on feminist studies brought a specific new understanding. If Sigmund Freud's emphasis on biological relationship and consciousness of biological change as the main parameter of understanding sexuality, Jacques Lacan, another psychoanalyst, insists upon the phallus as a symbol of masculinity, instead of the physical penis: "[the phallus] is the embodiment of the male status, to which men accede and in which certain rights inhere- among them a right to a woman. It is an expression of the transmission of male dominance. It passes through women and settles upon men" (Rubin 131). A different approach towards sex and gender can be found in the postmodernist theorist Michel Foucault's work on the *History of Sexuality* (1979), according to which both (sex and gender) "are inescapably cultural categories that refer to ways of describing and understanding human bodies and human relationships, our relationships to ourselves and to others. Sex and gender necessarily overlap, sometimes confusingly so", argues Glover and Kaplan (xxvi). Recent studies on gender are less inclined to address the debate between sex and gender; rather, they focus on how our social, economic, political, and cultural systems and positions shape as well as determine our gendered identities. Gender is not a fixed or permanent identity. Instead, it is a social role, subject to be performed and re-performed by speech and behaviour, observed by Judith Butler in her work *Gender Trouble: feminism and the subversion of identity* (179).

The ambiguity in the definition of gender and sex makes it more difficult to distinguish them into fixed categories. However, in most analytical schools, gender is more rooted in one's sociocultural roles and responsibilities. Both sex and gender are

embraced and incorporated in the study of sexuality in the west. The west has used sexuality as an umbrella term to include both biological and mental conditions like physical differences, gender identity, reproductive capability, desires etc (Weeks 15-25). Jeffrey Weeks's observation, while endorsing Kenneth Plummer's statement, in this regard, may be noted, "nothing is sexual … but naming makes it so" (25). While both the body and mind form one's sexuality, but meaning and connotation are given in one's social relations (15). However, I will use the term as gender studies and culture studies have understood it in terms of biological features and the embedded meaning in Indian society and cultural understanding.

As a woman reader, when the researcher approaches the reading of gender in Mbh with a Bakhtinian dialogic lens, it feels disempowering that Bakhtin has ignored gender altogether. Now the question is, while reading the Mbh, which is commonly believed to be a 'manly' text narrated by male authors dealing with masculine norms, it will be interesting to read gender in Mbh as a woman, following Bakhtin's theory to promote an empowering gender paradigm which will be more gender neutral, rather than a feminist approach. By gender neutrality, the understanding is to look at the treatment of gender in the text neither with the lens of authoritative discourses like feminism or the theory of masculinity. The scholars like Wayne Booth, Dale Bauer and Julia Kristeva have used Bakhtin's dialogism in the feminist discourse (*Feminism, Bakhtin , and the Dialogic* (1991). Bakhtin's understanding of a national language consists of multiple contesting factors like genre, class, age, and family (*Discourse in the Novel* 288-291). However, he does not include the power struggle between men's voices and women's voices as a defining factor in language. By ignoring the conflict

between authoritative male-centric language and the subversive women's language, Bakhtin seems to be siding with male-centric monologic writings (Booth). However, such analysis is against the thrust of Bakhtin's dialogic theory, which provides space for competing and contesting voices in language systems and creating knowledge. Julia Kristeva, another feminist scholar, used dialogue, carnival, and intertextuality to explore the power conflict in language and heralds carnival as spaces for rebellion and subversion of authority (*Word, Dialogue, and Novel*). The main axis of Bakhtin's dialogic theory is the confrontation between two tendencies, "a dominant, hegemonic, monologic, centripetal discourse" and "a marginalized, heterologic, dialogic, centrifugal discourse. The two tendencies- unifying and disunifying –exist in continual dialogue and struggle with one another" (Halasek 68). These competing voices (subversive, marginalized) voices are capable of incorporating their "characteristics intentions and accents" (*Discourse in the Novel* 290) and influencing the meaning making and knowledge creation which is always open to new engagement. Bakhtin also views that dominant centripetal forces always try to suppress and silent the centrifugal subversive forces by positing them as the "ultimate word" (Dostoesvsky 293); and such attempt is subverted through active interventions of alternative voices and forces.

To define authoritative discourse, Bakhtin refers to those discourses which "is located in a distanced zone, organically connected to a past that is felt to be hierarchically higher… the word of the fathers." (*Discourse in the Novel* 342). The authoritative discourse gains its authority from social, religious, and cultural traditions. Because of the reverence and canonical halo attached to it, if approached by a reader,

the reader gets overpowered by its halo, the reader's authority gets compromised, and objective reading or knowledge creation does not become possible. An authoritative text emphasizes upon a singular and ultimate reality, which is male-centric, heterosexual, and beyond questions or contestations. "Authoritative reading is disempowering, even destructive. Those who read authoritatively do not achieve a dialogic understanding of a text" (Halasek 69). And it is a sad truth that "everyone, men and women alike, learns to read like a man," which means reading with "the androcentric perspective" (XV) claimed by Fetterley, as pointed out by Schweickart and Flynn; such reading perspective is disempowering, limited, and needs to be resisted.

Such resistance against androcentric reading has come from women writers, who question the male-centric universal approach of such texts, present the consciousness of women, engage in dialogue and debate with these texts, and often rewrite them from the perspectives of others. Schweickart calls them 'resisting reader' which refers to women readers and writers who exposes the androcentricity of what has customarily passes for the universal (42). However, following Kay Halasek, I will go back to Bakhtin, who proposes "internally persuasive" reading to oppose authoritative reading. In the words of Halasek,

> Internally persuasive discourse, unlike authoritative, is proximate, dynamic, and closely connected to and assimilated into the writer's own words. It is as if the words of the other have been integrated with the writer's own, the two interwoven like the cross threads of a fabric. The internally persuasive word exists on the border between two speaking subjects, achieving meaning

> through their repartee, intertextuality, and dialogism. Internally persuasive discourse does not demand allegiance but encourages creativity. Meaning-making is achieved by continuously and cooperatively sharing texts or discourses. ("Discourse in the Novel" 345). [Halasek 70]

The analysis clearly suggests that a resisting reader must adopt the internally persuasive reading of an authoritative text to challenge the proclaimed authority and expose the centrifugal forces, i.e., the discourse of others, including women. The problem, however, is still in the practice of reading with dichotomies like male /female and masculinist/feminist while dealing with serious discourses like centripetal/centrifugal forces and authoritative/resistance reading. Binaries have historically been created to position one against the other, in this context, against the male. To continue reading and following the paradigm is to reestablish the importance and insistence of such biological differences, which is problematic. If feminized voices are defined only through their opposition to masculinist tradition, it will end up depending entirely on the masculinity discourse for its existence and definition, the very binarism Bakhtin has opposed in his dialogic theory (Hohne & Wussow, ix-x). Therefore, we need to be mindful that while opposing oppressive male-centric monologic ideology, the solution should also not be producing a 'feminist monologic voice' that makes universal claims on the condition of women. Kren Hohne and Helen Wussow in the Introduction of their edited volume titled *Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory and Bakhtin* (1994), have problematized the concept of the female voice as a singular monologic unity; they argue that if each voice contains multiple voices of others as per Bakhtinian notion of dialogism, female voice also contains

multiple voices of others irrespective of gender. Therefore, claiming singularity or unity of discourse on the basis of gender is an illusion (ix). They point out that "Bakhtin dislikes all claims to oneness and to speak of a single-sexed language is to move toward a monologism that is at once reprehensible and dogmatic" (XI).

If authoritative language is to exist, it exists in conflict with other voices, namely female voices, in order to silence and marginalize them. In that case, it is not that only gender will determine one's authority over the other. It is the resistant reader who, through internally persuasive reading of a text, can resist the trap of monologic privileging of gendered voices and discover the multiple voices, competing, conflicting, and dialoguing with one another, struggling to pop out, irrespective of their genders. In Mbh, the central male characters are heroic but equally vulnerable, weak, and unheroic; in the same way, the central female characters are subordinate yet independent, suppressed yet dynamic, marginalized yet empowered, conform to the norms of the social power structure, and yet question and critique it. As a resistant reader, Bakhtin's dialogic concept provides me the space to read the epic neither as a masculinist nor a feminist narrative but to explore the voices of authority and subversion, dominance and resistance in both male and female characters with their multiple and sometimes contradictory subject positions.

Therefore, it can be said that authoritative reading and internally persuasive reading can "work in dialogue with one another (one must first understand the claims made by an author before commenting productively on them) [Halasek 71]. To be a resistant reader, one does not necessarily need to be a woman; internally persuasive reading can also be adopted by a man; revisiting a text, looking at a text with fresh

eyes with new critical insights can also be done by a male reader who will be able to put his/her experience into the interpretation of a text, and in this way, s/he becomes a resistant reader, whose resistance is not just subversion of authorial intention but to use it as a crucial base to defer, to question, find underlined nuances and complexities, the silences which are not given enough prominence. The reader/reteller, by putting their own experience of time, space, age, ideology, and social factors in the reading process, enables brewing fresh dialogue and engagement with an authoritative text, exploring the innate multiplicity of conflicting voices. And this approach to reading a text makes it dialogic.

'Dialogical self', as defined and developed by H.Hermans and H.Kempen, argues against a singular description of a character in a novel and observes that "different voices, often of a markedly different character and representing a multiplicity of relatively independent worlds, interact to create a self narrative" (208). Following Bakhtin's notion of self in the Polyphonic and dialogic nature of the novel, they argue that the self is inherently plural, and dialogical relations emerge within a self or in relation to another self when more than one voice emanates and engages from a particular position (2002: 74). In Mbh, each character or self, irrespective of gender, inhabits multiple dialogic positions; they are neither stable or consistent nor transparent; these are complex characters with multiple ideologies and interests and they embody multiple voices and positions within and in relationship to other voices. Patton observes "Mahabharata is the exemplar par excellence of Hermans's, Kempen's and Bakhtin's ideas. For each character, there are a series of dialogical positions, not all of them consistent, not all of them transparent, but each of them most clearly a

voice taken in relationship to other voices within, as well as in relationship to other selves without." (99) Therefore, when we look for a single gender ideology or define gender in terms of traditional social, cultural, and biological norms, we tend to limit its possibilities and potentialities. The retellings have reestablished the dialogic positions of these characters, capturing multiple, contradictory, and conflicting voices of the self within and in relation to others. The polyphonic characteristics of Draupadi are seen in the interaction of conflicting voices between "fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission" (Patton 104). So, a dialogic self with multiple voices is one who inhabits multilayered positions can not be defined by his/her sex and a singular gender ideology. Neither a man nor woman in Mbh can be defined on the basis of a single-gender ideology. Gender is performative, as Butler will argue, and the characters' conduct, performance, thought process, and action shape and reshape their identity, which is multilayered.

In the next section, I will take up a few central male and female characters from the novel *Parva* to reestablish the dialogical nature of these characters and how their identity can not be confined based on stable gendered identity, rather how they have gone beyond gender norms and construct and reconstruct their identities in relation to their own self as well as in relation to other selves. As a reader, my approach will be to reflect upon how these dialogic selves have created a reality that is unfinalized, inconclusive, and open to further interpretation. These characters are neither in the grips of the author nor in the grips of the readers/retellers; thus, can no authoritative, exclusive, or definitive approach be taken while reading the epic or its varied interpretations. The Mbh retellings "deny the absolutism of a single and unitary

language" (Bakhtin, DI 366) and thus facilitate new perspectives about constructing gender-based identities. The innumerable retellings substantiate that the epic does not celebrate an authoritative discourse, a hegemonic voice, centripetal force, and tradition; it allows readers to find multiple dialogic consciousness and polyphonic voices and develop a new discourse and utterance around that as per the need of time and space, making the epic always a contemporary narrative.

Problematizing Gender and Gendered Identities in the Mbh

Mbh is one of India's most defining cultural narratives, which complicates the role and construction of masculine and feminine gender. The multivalent nature of gender arises because of man and woman's association with varna and dharma. The complicated understanding of dharma makes the understanding of gender and masculinity non-definite, ambiguous, and flexible. This ambiguity and fluidity have helped numerous contemporary retellings engage with the epic and look at the central and peripheral characters through the lens of contemporary time and space. Most of these characters can fit themselves in the garb of the traditional patriarchal approach as well as in the contemporary image without much distortion. The chapter will touch upon males, females, and others, along with a gendered understanding of masculinity, femininity, and the third gender. Simon Broadback and Black observe that "along with *dharma* and *varana*, gender is one of the most central and most contested issues in the text," and it gets "manifested in multiple ways without the text providing one consistent and definitive view" (10). As we see, the epic focuses on the roles of men and women in ancient India, undoubtedly constructing gender roles in terms of binaries like masculinity and femininity. In the words of Bredback and Brian, gender in the

Mbh "is always fragile and conditional" (19). Despite its unstable nature, gender does exist. It cannot be fully controlled by individual choice, as one is born in a social and cultural system that invariably gets internalized into their identities and conduct.

A number of social, political, and material factors are responsible for developing the assumptions associated with gender, namely, masculinity and femininity. However, if we go deeper, the understanding of gender and identities based on gender is not homogenous in the epic, a similarly, the subordinate position of women in the epic is also not ubiquitous in the epic; the women may not seem to be the active agents always, but their assertive decisions, mental strength, courage in their speech, decision, and conduct have given them an identity which is not just of subordination throughout. Women are active, passive, assertive, and subordinate according to the moment, position, and situation. The conflict between *stridharma* (duty of a wife, mother, daughter) and the *apadharma* (as an individual person) has given enough space to the new writers/ readers/ retellers to enter into the narrative of the Mbh and highlight and explore the gender fluidity and instability of gendering the sexs in the epic which makes it a contemporary text.

The epic in the Sanskrit language does have reference to three kinds of gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. For each gender, there are Sanskrit equivalent words that, if deconstructed, reflect multiple implications. But these words have been used in different contexts by different characters without reflecting any essentiality of these genders. The arbitrary usage of different genders to refer to different characters can be seen sometimes to compliment one or to abuse or insinuate one. The socially accepted traits of these genders are problematized and even contested within the gender domain.

To better understand gender studies in the ancient Indian context, we need to accumulate the varieties of terms associated with these three genders, namely masculinity, femininity, and neuter. Some of the Sanskrit words to refer to man, manhood, and manliness are *purusha, paurusha, mahavira, parakrama*. "the emphasis on physical fitness, sexual potency, and fertility for an individual to be a 'complete man' runs throughout ancient Indian texts" (Sahgal 154). *Purusha* is not just a term to mean masculine gender; it is a rich philosophical principle, often used together with Prakriti, not as opposing binary, but rather complimentary to each other. Technically, if *Purusha* refers to masculine principles, symbolizing the *Shiva* (one of the *Tridevs* in the Indian pantheon) who is associated with detachment, renunciation, and consciousness, according to Samkhya Philosophical School, *Prakriti* is associated with feminine principles, symbolizing *Parvati*, the consort of *Shiva*, representing action, nurturing and passion. Most of the central male and female characters are depicted in the *purusha-prakriti* principles. In opposition to manliness, the neuter gender or the third gender is referred to as *khliba* (Wendi Doniger and Brian Smith, ed., *Laws of Manu*, p.58 fn), *napumsaka* (no man)[Doniger and Brian Smith 58) which represents the non-man, eunuch, homosexuals. The word *akliba* is also used to refer to someone 'having the qualities of man' (M. Monier Williams 485).

The epic undoubtedly emphasizes men and courageous kings and men who define the stature of a true *vira*. However, its overemphasis upon the sons and powerful men may not be seen only as a homogenous glorification of men and masculinity. The epic has not defined it correctly, but on a number of occasions, it has touched upon various aspects and complexities of masculinities, sometimes, explicitly and, in other

occasions, implicitly. It has been discussed that Mbh narratives, in part or as a whole, have historically been reproduced and revisited since classical antiquity to suit the social, political, and cultural agenda of the time and space in which they were produced. The epics have been invoked time and again to support the gender roles and differences in the Indian society. If women have been advised to model Sita and Savitri, sibling relations should be like Rama, Laxmana, or the Pandavas. The new retellings help us to throw light on those areas of the epic that have not been explored to their potential. The sexual ideology of the Mbh will be revisited in the light of two retellings. A number of studies have been done on the feminist analysis of the epic and feminist perspectives of innumerable retellings to give women voices. So, the epic seems to have been studied mainly from the vantage point of feminism. However, clearly there is a lack of enough studies in literature which deals with masculinity which is not devoid of femininity. My contention in this work is that Mbh definitely glorifies men and masculinity in several parameters, but it also provides the readers threads to understand female sexuality and its relation to masculinity.

The study of masculinity is undoubtedly a late entrant in the gender study. For a considerably long period of time, it was believed that it is one dimensional related to male power, hegemony and control over the female, in opposition to feminine gender and to feminist studies. Also, masculinity study is mainly "western and modern in its genesis" (Sahgal, “Masculinity in Early India: Constructing an Embryonic Frame” 151), catering to heterosexuality, which is considered as the 'normal sexual orientation'. Male sexual organs/ penis/phallus, the reproductive capability of man, becomes the defining factor for masculinity. Manhood has also been defined as

contrasted to womanish or childish attributes. What it means is that a man is a man who holds power and fulfils the expected qualities of bravery, courage, and a protection inscribed to him by society and tradition, along with the procreative functions of continuing the family lineage. Such one dimensional traditional homophobic, antifeminine masculine norm is revisited by theorists like R.W.Connell and Michael Kimmel, who started analyzing gender as "a structure of social practice" (Connell 2005, 71). The new theorists put forward the notion that masculinity is not a single unified fixed universal idea; rather, they believe in the notion of multiple masculinities, which include hegemonic masculinity, subordinate masculinity, and other alternative masculinities, etc. Robert William Connell defines masculinity as "simultaneously a place in gender relations, the practices through which men and women engage that place in gender, and the effects of these practices in bodily experience, personality and culture" (1995, p.71).

In India, there are rarely found texts on masculinity studies in particular, however, we can find equivalent studies in the epic and appropriate the understanding of multiple masculinities in the context of our study. *Manusmriti* (200BCE to 300 CE) is infamous for propagating the subordinated position of women in the society. A man is emasculated in the social standard if one does not follow or carry out the social responsibility of reproduction, power acquisition, showcasing strength and valour in the war etc. Simultaneously, if a man displays emotions and weaknesses publicly, abstains from showing physical strength, fails to subordinate the women folk, and is impotent, homosexual, such man will be demeaned as 'failed masculinity' or 'feminized men'. In Mbh, there are plenty of examples where central male characters are either

impotent or childless, display their emotions openly, fail to show physical valour, resorted to peace, unable to protect their women; also, there are central women characters who are active observer, emotionally strong, war enthusiast, intellectually assertive, have influenced /controlled the decisions of male folk with or without coming to the forefront. These attributes in both men and women do not conform to the traditional gender identity of men with masculinity and women with femininity. Recent studies on gender and masculinity studies have postulated that categorizations like masculinity or femininity cannot carry homogenous, unidimensional attributes associated with them worldwide. The hegemonic dominance of masculinity is complex and cannot be explained without their relation to women or men with feminine emotional attributes.

The consistent use of the 'bull' metaphor to signify strength and manliness can be noted in the entire Mbh text for the central characters. Both kings and gods like Indra and Agni have been repeatedly referred to as bulls to signify their strength, fertility, virility, and sexual potency. The semen of a man has been venerated as a 'life force' and not to be wasted away if it is discharged. A number of sages in the Mbh, like Drona, Kripa, are born because of a specific moment of *kama* they experience, resulting in semen discharge. The erected male sexual organ is a physical symbol of man's physical strength in most ancient societies. It is also associated with sexual potency, *putra*/son bearing capacity, which defines one's manhood. The *putra* is extremely important to a father because it is believed that through him, the family lineage is carried on, and ancestors also get their due in heaven. Brian Black's observation, in this context, is justified: "here the father not only continues to live

through his son, but through his son absolves himself at any wrong doings" (143). If manhood is depended on one's virility and sexual potency, the absence of this suggests the opposite of being a man or an inferior man. The reference to *napumsaka* or eunuch has feminine attributes embedded in it. In Mbh, Arjuna, during *Agyaytvasa* or exile phase, took the form of an eunuch dance teacher Brihannala/Brihadanand, which is a "a feminized transvestite of ambiguous sex and feminized gender" (Goldman 380).

Masculinity and its symbolic manifestations are recurrently used in Mbh. A man is not just a *purush* with a phallus but is also expected to perform his dharma. The *paurusha* of a *purush* depends on his ability to follow the right path of action. However, the multiple implications of dharma often bring conflict in that arena. The idea of *purusharthas*, which the epic deals with in the form of *dharma, artha, kama and moksha*, are (propriety, profit, pleasure, and liberation) features associated with a true *purusha*. For example, a Kshatriya man is expected to follow his *jati* dharma by fighting against his enemies or wrongdoers, which is also associated with manhood. However, killing or blood shedding is an act of adharma or an immoral act.

The Pandava brothers, especially Yudhistir and Arjun, had to go through the conflict of dharma and adharma; the manhood of the Pandavas brothers was disparagingly questioned and mocked by Durypdhan during Draupadi's *Vastraharan* episode. The Pandava brothers' inability to protect their wife Draupadi's honor is itself a reference of emasculation. Draupadi herself, in the *Virata* Parva and during their exile period, questioned the manhood of the brothers, especially Yudhistir, who was unwilling to wage war against the Kauravas. She calls their behavior like 'castrates' in *Virata* Parva (41). Bhishma has been called a 'eunuch' by Sisupala while commenting

on his life of celibacy as a "lie that you maintain either from stupidity or impotence (*Khlibavada*) (42, 43). Duryodhan challenges his manhood if he ever agrees to Pandava's good fortune (52). Bhima also tries to encourage his elder brother to go to war by saying to behave like a Kshatriya man and not get submerged in the sea of despair. Another example of manliness associated with toughness and bravery is when Kunti tells the story of Vidura or Vidula, who encourages her son to behave like a true Kshatriya and tells him, "Don't smolder- blaze up! Attack with a vengeance and slay the enemies… one is a man to the extent of his truculence and unforgivingness. The forgiving man, the meek man is neither man, nor woman (tr. Van Buitenen 5.131.29-30,). Being the warrior, protector (of family and wife), and progenitor (procreation/ begetting sons) are the characteristics of model of masculinity. The Mbh, as a grand heroic epic, depicts both principles. Van Buitenen calls it 'manly' (168) because of its focus on fierce warriors. The close association of masculinity and virility can be observed throughout the epic. Leonard Zwilling and Michael Sweet argue, "from the outset, we see that Vedic society was strongly patriarchal in character and placed an extremely high value on male potency, procreative ability, being one of the means by which a man could achieve high social status" (101).

Despite the essential celebration and glorification of kshatriya masculinity in the entire epic, masculiny cannot be understood without relating it to femininity. Both male and female characters in the epic have exhibited some normative characteristics in terms of their gender-defined roles and responsibilities, but these normative defined characteristics do not define those characters as they often go beyond it and enter into the realm of the other gender roles, signifying the provisional and relational nature of

genders. Moreover, despite various stories and substories remarking about role and conduct of women, the narrative gets complicated because of women's association with dharma. The *stridharma*, prescribed for women, does not have a monolithic principle for all women irrespective of their situations, positions, and time (Bredback and Black) . Rather, *stridharma* also carries multiple implications and significance, and the conduct changes according to one's position, and role. For example, Draupadi, Kunti, Gandhari, the central female characters, have played different roles as mother, wife, or friend in different situations. Being a *pativrata* (extremely devoted to their husband), a woman is the model of a wife, The female characters like Kunti, Draupadi, Hidimbi (the Rakshasha wife of Bhima) have played their part in insisting and encouraging the males to wage a war against the evil, play their part as a man and exhibit their manhood. Draupadi is "fearsomely able" (Stephanie Jamison) who literally incites Yudhistir for avenging the insult of the Pandavas, in the hands of Kaurava. She even says that a man must take maximum advantage of the weakness of its opponent. Andrea Custodi compares Draupadi with the vengeful war goddess Athena and argues that it is the undercurrent of vengeance that caused lethal havoc to the Kuru clan just the way Gandhari's curse destroyed the Yadavas.

In addition to *pativrata*, another feminine principle that has been highlighted in the epic is the women, being compared to *Sri* or *Lakshmi*, the goddess of riches, property, and prosperity (the consort of Vishnu). Some women characters like Draupadi, Satyavati, Ganga, Savitri, Damayanti have been venerated as *Sri* for bringing prosperity and success to their husbands. If the paradigm associated with *Sri* is dug deeper, Lakshmi is seen as the mobile, active, and independent goddess; she

chooses the one who is victorious. By comparing these women with Lakshmi, their assertiveness, independence, and active nature have been signified. Both the concepts of Sri and Pativrata, which are associated with supreme feminine principles, are restrictive as they render meaning in their association with the male folks. If we study some of these central women characters, it can be seen that they do not conform to this one dimensional monolithic understanding of femininity. Black concludes that women like Draupadi, Gandhari, Kunti "athough sometimes silent in the background, emerge as primary characters in shaping the story and giving it direction" (Black 97) but they are never 'phantom'. They have exhibited their pativrata nature but equally questioned their husbands, reprimanded them, and refused to be just a valet to their husbands. "In story after story, women see what needs to be done, take command, and order the bewildered, hand-wringing male participants into their supporting roles – and the enterprise fails only when one of these ninnies messes up his part of the woman's plan," observed by Stephanie Jamison (15). There are references to 'dharmically accomplished,' 'resourceful energetic' (15) women like Sulbha (12.308) who have openly challenged the invalidity of gender discrimination and taught the king Janaka, the male counterpart, lessons on dharma.

The way the normative feminine principles are subverted and challenged by principal women characters in the epic through their speech, acts, independent thought processes, and assertive actions, the masculine paradigms have equally been diluted and subverted. Men and women in the Mbh exhibit multiple gender roles. Most of the principal male characters could not father children and failed to protect their wives' honor on several occasions. The central characters of the narrative in Kuru reign were

not children of their fathers, starting from Dhritrashtra, Pandu, Vidura, five Pandavas. The practice of *niyoga* or levirate has been used as a socially sanctioned to beget them. *Niyoga* is like a modern-day practice of eligible sperm donor; an eligible man is appointed to procreate a child on behalf of the husband with the consent of the wife and permission from the husband so that the family line must be continued. If procreation is one of the supreme paradigms of manhood, many of the central male characters do not fulfil that aspect. The association of masculinity with bravery and violence is also problematized due to the conflict between *nivrittimarg*, or the *marg* of renunciation, propagated by the Brahmins, and the *pravrittimarg*, or the path of action of the Kshatriya dharma. Additionally, it is further complicated when some of the Kshatriya warriors refuse to follow the path of violence and cruelty and prefer the path of peace. The venerated warriors like Yudhistir, Arjuna, and even Krishna prefer peace, compromise, and even escaping (in the case of Krishna) over battles that go against masculinist principles. The above examples from the epic reflect the unstable provisional, flexible, and situational or contextual nature of gender and gender identities attributed to a man or a woman in the Mahabharata without associating them with fixed gender categories. The epic's flexibility, provisionality, and multiplicity are the sole reasons why the Mbh retellings, since antiquity, could easily enter into the narrative and engage in a dialogic relation with the epic. The mobility and flexibility in the male and female behavior allow the later texts/ retold texts/new narratives to interact with these characters and get scope for further elucidation and further exploration without looking for fixed categories of meanings. Gender cannot solely define one's identity, but it is determined through interaction, intersection, and engagement with one's social, political, and situational axis.

The different models of gender behavior and their continuous negotiation can be seen in the central characters of the Mbh narrative. Yudhistir, the Kshatriya king's extreme alignment with virtue and dharma led him to oscillate between *himsa* and *ahimsa*, aggressive action and passive renunciation, between Kshatriya ideals of dharma and ascetic life; Bhima's superhuman strength juxtaposes with his good-hearted emotional nature, desire for validation; Arjun, the greatest warrior's virile masculinity is contrasted with his image of a eunuch dance teacher, his refusal to fight the battle; his sexual relation with multiple women is juxtaposed with his profound love and friendship with Krishna; Draupadi's ideal pativrata image is articulated as she tells Satyabhama, the secret of her being a successful Panadava wife: "My lay rests on my husband, as, I think, it eternally does with women. He is the God, he is the path, nothing else" (Van Buitenen 3.222.35,) but she does not hesitate to criticize her husband's gambling habit, passivity in avenging the insult, inflicted on her and the Pandavas by Kaurava brothers. She is simultaneously one of the best articulators of her thoughts and emotions and a great listener to her husband and friend, Krishna. Thus, it can be said that the contrasting behaviors of these characters reflect their dialogical selves and flexible gender identities. Custodi notices "a lack of clear distinction between the sexes has inauspicious resonances" in the Mbh, signifying the relational, contextual and provisional nature of gender which is determined by other relational factors like time, space, position and gender also. This is the reason why in Mbh retellings, these characters are revisited time and again, and every revisit addresses a new dimension to their roles and characters. Draupadi, Kunti and Gandhari's struggle as wives, mothers and their assertiveness bring out the ambivalent nature of sexuality and challenge the concept that masculinity or femineity are not

gendered identity, confined to men and women respectively, rather, a man can equally be feminine and a woman can simultaneously be masculine in their approach and behavior. Ruth Vanita, in her essay "The Self is Not Gendered", reflecting upon the debate between Sulbha and king Janaka observes, that Sulbha successfully "defeats" Janaka in the debate and "… logically establishes that there is no essential differences between a man and a woman "(76). Her victory in the debate justifies her choices in life and actions (90). She logically establishes her actions beyond refute. Such assertive traits, clarity of purpose, independent decision-making capacities, awareness of the social norms, and the decision to critique it, subvert it, or revere it are very carefully internalized among some other female characters. The point is that Sulbha is not a singular exception; the other women characters equally reflect some of these traits.

The normative gendered identity is also diluted in the Mbh through the presence of characters who belong to the third gender category or are named *napumsaka* or *khliba*, one who is neither male nor female. In the Mbh, such ambiguous gendered characters are mostly due to some curse or supernatural act, however, in the post-Vedic period, as Zwilling and Sweet argue that, "in general the third sex is residual category, comprising a wide variety of non-normative biological, gender role and socio-behavioral traits" (123) are more "innate or congenial." Despite its recognition as a sexual category, it does not challenge the normative binary gender framework. The principle examples of third sex category people are mostly temporary or for a particular purpose, for example, Amba reborn as Shikhandini, born as a woman, switching her sex to a man for a limited period for the purpose of killing Bhishma, and also Arjuna, appearing as a eunuch dance instructor for a period of one year in the

Virata Parva. Both these temporary third-sex characters do not necessarily exhibit a strong agency on their own or challenge the heterosexual model of gender framework in society in any way. Zilling and Sweet observes that "they lack reproductive capacity… will fall into the residual third or liminal category." Therefore, the third sex could not exist on its own, but only as it participates in a negation or combination of male and female traits. These terms are used as a verbal attack to taunt one's masculinity or to compare one with a woman in a derogatory manner. They are neither fit to avenge on their own, nor eligible to go to heaven. "Amba's resistance disrupted the social norm and brought her nothing but trouble and unhappiness" in comparison to her other sisters, she "did not, after all, have the satisfaction of exacting revenge on her own" (Dasgupta 51-2). Despite no individual agency is given to these characters mostly but retellings have explored the pain and struggle of the thirds sex or that what does not fall into the normative paradigm. *The pregnant king* by Devdutt Pattanayak will explore that aspect in this chapter.

After careful analysis of the multiple works produced on the topic of gender in the Mbh, it can be easily found that most of these works focus on how the epic has reinforced the traditional gender norms in ancient classical society and how masculinity and male child have unequivocally celebrated throughout the epic, subordinating women as the background entity except a few women who belong to the upper strata of the society, carves their niche in the society. A lot of scholarly work has been done on how the Mbh retellings have revisited some of these women characters like Draupadi from a feminist perspective, emphasizing the idea that the classical epic suppressed their voices and real emotions, which the feminist scholars and writers are

now capturing. How the ambiguous nature of dharma has complicated the gender role has also been touched upon by Brian Black and Simon Bradbock in the epic. The absence of a female author in the epic gives the female voices out, and the female speech and reactions are being filtered multiple times by multiple male narrators (Vyasa, Vaisampayana, Sauti) whose subjective identity must have had some impact on the delineation of the female character of the epic; such three or four layers of distancing from the original female voice might have led to the backgrounding and silencing of women in the epic. A number of scholars are working on the individual identity reflected in the speech and behavior of women. Having agreed to most of these areas of focus, the purpose of my study is to establish that gender, being one of the most contentious issues in the epic, should not be read with a single focus attention on highlighting patriarchy, misogyny, and masculine violence. Innumerable references can be found in the epic to establish that aspect. However, a lot of reference can also be found in the epic which challenges the very notion of fixed gender norms, roles and responsibility on the basis of their biological differences.

Dialogical Relationship between Mahabharata and its Retellings Parva and The Pregnant King

Parva (English translation) by S.L.Bhyrappa strives to revisit Vyasa's epic universe in the 20th century by recreating and recharacterizing the epic's central characters and populating with some new characters from his own historical perspective. As a modern novelist, he reproduced/reconstructed his work's universe using his own specialty in the field of educational psychology and interest in psychic cultural themes while preserving the 'essence' of the original content, simultaneously

focusing on the issues/materials that have not been explored into the original by entering into the psyche of the characters. As a reconstructionist, he kept a balance between the source material and his creative imagination. Bhyrappa observes in his essay on" Mahabharata: My Attempt at a Recreation" that he learned the Mbh stories from his mother, who learned its stories from Kannada Mbh, Jamini Bharata, and Bhagavata and also mixed many folk elements into it. The "characters, situations and conflicts exercised a powerful influence in shaping my literary sensitivity, human values, and sense of relations and conflicts… At different phases of my mental and value development, I felt like understanding the Mahabharata characters and situations from a new angle", he writes (255). When he decided to recreate the epic in a different genre and in a different language, it was not simply a homage in appreciation of the epic and its grand theme, instead it "was a process of crystalizing" his experience and understanding of the epic as a reader while "relating its significance" in the lives of others or contemporaries. he writes, "I must adopt a realistic form in terms of human experience though I knew that my aim would also be an in-depth probing of the characters" to grasp the plurality of human experiences and its vast possibilities (256)". Having visited the places and possible sites and the Himalayan territories, experiencing the social systems and cultural customs of the people for five years, he "tried to reconstruct its historicity through material collected outside the text but related to its frame" while letting his imagination full creative freedom to fill in the gaps or silences, contradictions and inconsistencies in the original source material (Raghavendra Rao 121). In Bhyrappa's own words from the Preface of the novel, "...what I am really writing about are not the characters from the *Bharata*. I was all along conscious that what I was doing was to bring out the diverse modes of human experience, the

quintessential nature of human relationship… (Translated by K. Raghavendra Rao, p 121). However, according to B.S.Chandrasekhar, "*Parva* not only deals with the web of human relations and the vicissitudes of life, it also examines some fundamental questions of human existence and death" (92).

The most outstanding aspect of the novel is the delineation of its male and female characters. Mbh is a complex story with a multitude of characters and complex technique of box within-box narrative technique; it is a difficult task for the novelist to use a particular technique for the storytelling. Bhyrappa has used a combination of "techniques appropriate to the occasions and characters" in delineating the characters, their subjective experience, emotional journey, and subject positions without imposing authorial opinions and intentions. If a simple technique of narration is used in describing the sociocultural condition, the central characters like Kunti, Gandhari, Draupadi, Karna, and Bhishma are developed by entering into the mind space of the characters through a stream-of-consciousness technique. Moreover, the retrospective technique, radio feature technique in creating a montage for the war commentary, and study through alter-egos (Yuyudhana to study Krishna) are being used. These techniques, adopted by Bhyrappa, "became a process of understanding and explicating the characters… asses (them)... in terms of its actions and achievements and not on the opinions expressed by the author". The performance, utterances, and actions of two female characters in contrast to primary male figures will be studied in this section to understand the building of their characters, the building of their selves, which is not necessarily gendered; how the dialogic relationship between the Mbh and retellings have developed and how the selves construe through dialogue with personal and social

and external environment will be studied. This will reinforce the ambiguity and plurality in gender.

On the surface level, the novel seems to have explored quite consistently the aspect of women "as thy name is fertility," and all women and men are concerned about pleasure and progeny through marriage; female bodies becoming merely a field to acquire and sow the male seeds, a vehicle to carry male progeny. Failing to give a girl in marriage as soon as they attain puberty is considered a sin and invites God's wrath. On the other hand, begetting multiple sons is considered relevant for both practical and spiritual reasons for the father. In such circumstances, the feeling of women, her anxiety and hopelessness, seems inconsequential. The only worth of a woman is reduced in her ability to procreate. In the novel, Kunti's unconsummated marriage, her continuous monthly flow caused turmoil in the Kuru household, especially the eldest patriarch, Bhishma, who experienced "the agony that the Kuru seed would not sprout' (Bhyrappa, Parva 46-47). He arranged Pandu's marriage with Madri, a Madra woman known for their fertility. The utmost respect for marriage as a social institution, controlled by dominant male ideology to maintain power relationships, is manifested in the novel.

In the epic, Kunti's voice and individuality are not endowed with enough space, but there are streaks and glimpses of the characters; her determination and strength of character, remaining in the backdrop, can surprise the readers. The novel *Parva* focuses on those unexplored aspects of her life as she goes through her experiences with personal, social, and external environments as a daughter, as an unmarried mother, as a wife, as co-wife, as a mother, and as a widow, above all, a self-respected,

free spirit, dignified kshatriya woman who is adventurous and spirited enough to explore the unexplored and even not for once wanted to settle for less. Her life journey and her thought process, actions, utterances, and decisions are revealed to us in retrospect when she is reminiscing about her young days at the threshold of the imminent grand war to be held between her sons and the Kauravas. Looking back, she, in different positions, dialogues within and with others based on external factors and relationships. The process constructs her self which is dialogic and cannot be confined to a single gendered ideology. As a young girl and the king's daughter, she followed the norms of social diktats, yet full of dreams and inquisitive to explore the hidden emotion and pleasure of marital bliss. She is proud of her physical features, which are ravishing and equally intimidating to others. Her desire to be a queen and get married to a lion-like well, built Kshatriya king who will match her build is fulfilled. She exercises her choice in the *swayamvara*. However, her choice of Pandu is not devoid of the influence and counseling of her parents. However, she was attracted by Pandu's physical stature, strength, and manliness. Her friends remarked that Pandu's body, "the body of a lion," can match her big build, and "his body answers to your height and size" (Parva 45). In her mind, she wished for a relationship who could 'crush' her and ride on her fiercely. These wishes and aspirations of a young girl are in tune with the social expectations of a girl who wants to serve her husband and make him happy.

Despite the emotional and physical turmoil in her marriage with Pandu, she remained a devoted wife, manufactured stories of lovemaking, accepted her husband's failure to impregnate the wife as her failure, and ultimately Madri, the second wife, was brought in. Her jealousy was evident, yet, soon, the wives bonded to share the

failure and, more importantly, the hypocrisy and false manliness of their common husband. Kunti was capable enough to understand her exploitation in the Kuru household and would resist it. Things seem to change as Madri fails to be impregnated with Pandu's child. Kunti's sharp comment reflects her strong persona to put the harsh reality on the face of King Pandu: "Even if you took four more wives, you would be incapable of preventing the flow of the menstrual blood." Such a powerful comment, missing in the epic, seems to be the voice of a wounded yet powerful soul. She is aware of power dynamics between husband and wife in society and also perhaps understands the need for her husband to prove his masculinity, yet she voices against her husband's false life in failing to own the truth of his being impotent. The true companionship develops between them as soon as Pandu owns his truth. Kunti, for the first time, equally felt the pain for her husband and respected him for his true self:"...the wall of deception and self-deception between us had been smashed. I found it impossible now to be separated from him after we had at last become one, finding each other in our true selves." (57). She found a new kind of "genuine bond of matrimony" between them. This is when she realizes her true companionship with the king. Indeed, Kunti's dialogical self is being constructed as different voices engage in dialogical relations to develop her character.

Things seem to take a different turn from here; "relations of resistance, compliance, and acceptance" are not always one dimensional. Pandu's failure to impregnate his two wives, the acceptance of his inability in society, his anxious desire to father a child by receiving treatment in the Himalayan region, and his decision to live the life of an ascetic in the forest are examples of the vulnerability of a dominant

member. As soon as he owns his truth and stops deceiving himself and others, Kunti feels oneness and empathy for Pandu. Kunti hopes to reclaim her first child as she shares the truth of her pregnancy to Pandu. It may also be seen as Kunti's assertion of her fertile belly, which Pandu also acknowledges as he tries to convince his wife to undergo niyoga: "... he said, 'yours is a belly that is most fertile, ever ready to receive male seeds and reproduce… your womb would never go dry and waste any seed sowed in it. well give me a child. soon" (*Parva* 74-75). Pandu's acceptance of his inability to impregnate his two wives may be considered a blot on his masculinity if understood in the parochial sense. If Pandu's character is studied from Kunti's perspective, the hegemonic masculinity is debunked as Pandu recognizes his vulnerability and acknowledges Kunti as the strong and sensible partner. His surrender to her, like a son to be understood and protected by the mother like, diminishes the power struggle associated with gender dynamics. Most importantly, the traditional power dynamics between men and women change, and the 'balance of power' seems to get divided or perhaps tilted toward Kunti.

Mahabharat, the epic, is silent about the process and procedure of *niyoga* except for some mechanical norms, which Bhishma describes during the Vyasa's *niyoga* with Ambika and Ambalika, the mothers of Pandu and Dhritrashtra. Parva has given a vivid account of the emotions, feelings, and attachment the art of sexual gratification can bring between two strangers. The practice of *niyoga*, as well as its applicability, historicity, and relevance, are elaborately discussed in the novel. When Pandu requests Kunti to undergo *niyoga*, there is a fascinating dialogue of perspectives and counter-perspectives between Kunti and Pandu, reflecting the argumentative and

logical skill of both, which ultimately resorts to the practical argument of the inheritance of the throne:

> He said, "If Dhritrashtra produced children first, we shall be in ruins."
>
> I, "Tell me, what should I do, I shall do whatever you say".
>
> He, … "Well, give me a child. Soon. Do you understand" (Parva 75)

Kunti's inclination and eagerness for *niyoga* seem stronger as she is not new to the experience of sexual gratification. However, it has to remain 'unsaid,' as *niyoga* is not about sexual gratification but about procreation. Pradip Bhattacharya's observation in this regard is interesting as he questions Kunti's hesitation to undergo *niyoga* is genuine or is it to bring Pandu to his knees for obliging him with sons (27)? The novel vividly depicts Kunti's passionate experience with the three members of the Deva clan, namely Dharma, Marut and Indra.

> (she) was on fire with desire… was eager…this time she knew well what she was aiming at. (Parva 77).

The epic maintains total silence on the gust of feeling Kunti experiences, and also the fear and trepidation Pandu, a king/ a husband, can have in letting his wife sleep and copulate with another man; it is undoubtedly a challenge to a man's sense of pride, masculinity, and manliness and must need guts and testing patience for a step like that. Pandu exhorts Kunti to promise that she would act according to dharma and not fall in love with the man, will think of her husband during physical proximity with the person,

will always regard the person as a parent, and most importantly, totally avoid his company once the job is done.

While discussing the *niyoga* episode of Vyasa with Ambika and Ambalika, the epic described it as a mechanical and repulsive union, "clinical, unemotional and severely utilitarian" (Parva 591). However, Kunti, a young, vibrant woman, questions the rare possibility of considering a *niyoga* partner as a parent and also how society wants to control not only a woman's body but also her emotions. The custom may be designed to use a woman's body as a mere field to sow the male seeds, but as we see in the novel, Kunti's passionate and long-standing loving and passionate encounter with all three members of the Deva tribe raised the hidden desire in Kunti to leave the impotent husband. She acknowledges her physical desire; however, despite her hidden wish to continue those passionate encounters each time, and also the promise of her protection from them, she decides not to deceive Pandu's faith and follow the *pativrata* dharma and get back to Pandu and thus accepting her husband's authority over her. However, this acceptance of authority is not an imposition on her, rather, it was a self-choice not to injure Pandu's oppressed heart, reflecting her agency and determination.

Men have historically been the figure of authority and dominance, but women without formal authority exhibit a socially sanctioned power to influence things and situations. Women in the novel exhibit considerable power in a patriarchal setup. As an old widowed mother, in approaching Karna, Kunti's motherly emotion as well as guilt can be witnessed, which, however, does not take her dignity. Her emotion for Karna in claiming motherhood is genuine, but she maintains her strength as a dignified person. Her strong message to her five sons reflects her powerful agency and authority:

"... please send my sons a message that Kunti has returned to Hastinavati. she will not stir from there. They must fight and win Hastinavati. And the coronation must be celebrated in Hastinavati"… "My husband was coronated earlier than that blind fellow,... Only my sons should reign in the original capital… Let my sons come to see me here with their victorious army after defeating the enemies of Dharma. I shall not stir out from here till then." (106). Kunti's character can be read as a strong, sophisticated, thoughtful woman capable of taking many different approaches and containing different voices. She exposes patriarchal bias and explores the possibility of female agency and her unique perspective on following her dharma. Kunti's strategic mind and power in influencing others and situations are also reflected in her decision to get Draupadi married to all five sons to avoid division and differences among the brothers, as they are all smitten by Draupadi's charm. To convince Draupadi, she uses a strong metaphor of the insatiable thirst for earth in which earth is compared to a female body who cannot be content with a single 'rain', 'stream' and 'flood': "The clouds turn empty after they pour into rain. But is the earth content with a single cloud? On the surface of the earth, the rain may become a stream, river, and flood, but beneath and within, the earth will be waiting with an open mouth, to cool another inner heat" (Parva 192) Kunti's influence on her household and on her sons and daughter-in-law never faded. This vital, intelligent and strong character has not been dealt with much. Bhyrappa writes, "Kunti as a character grows more powerfully than her daughter-in-law" (My Attempt at Recreation 261)

A number of scholarly works are produced to refer to the agency of Draupadi in exposing the patriarchal biases in norms and the ambiguities in dharma. Her

questions in the Sabha or assembly hall after the dice game have remained unanswered due to the complex nature of dharma and its interrelation with gender. Alf Hiltebeitel describes Draupadi's questions and arguments in the Sabha, making her a potent political agent, which has far-reaching implications in the issue of gender socially and politically (2001b:240). *Parva* is another meaningful addition to Draupadi's study of mind space and marital space. In Bhyrappa's own words, "Draupadi was successful in holding all the brothers together. But could she love all the five equally and in the same way? Was it to the end a successful and satisfying marital experience? - was my question, and my probing in the novel revealed that it was not. "(Attempt at a recreation 261). Her physical exhaustion in everyday night games, emotional agony, and romance turning into tribulation in dividing her feelings in the polyandrous marriage, and ultimately, what she receives in return for all the sacrifices are some of the territories the novel sheds light on. The images she used to describe her life are that of an 'over-used cow' and also "a sugarcane totally squeezed out of its juices" (Parva 199). the novel takes up the question of her everyday physical exhaustion with her five husbands, who, after four days of abstinence, get ready on the fifth night, but Draupadi's body never gets its rest. To address the issue, as Draupadi approached Kunti, the design was changed from daily to yearly possession of the wife.

The control of a woman's body is a very important issue in the feminist discourse. The new design gave her enough space to rest. The mother-in-law, who is well aware of her possible physical exploitation, immediately takes steps. The episode reflects the sharing of a woman's burden or empathizes with it. Kunti assured her that her sons would "obey" her; However, the obedience came not just as an order from the

mother, but Draupadi had to gain that respect through her subtle use of power in the household, keep the brothers united and argumentative and logical skill in the moment of crisis. In the assembly hall after the dice game, they failed to protect her honor, and humiliations were hurled upon her. Her confident, rhetorically skilled, critical mind raises pertinent questions to all the male relatives who otherwise bear the flag of dharma. The inability to respond to her questions unanimously reflects the patriarchal bias, and the way she argues her position reveals the female perspective of the dharma. It is she who saved the Pandavas and the king through her brilliant rhetorical skills and timeless questions.

The novel deals with this episode in fragments as Draupadi remembers her humiliation, her questions to the male members, the silence of Yudhisthira, Bhima's confused rage, and the moment of discovering her own courage. While looking back at the moment of her extreme and overwhelming verbal insult and rancorous laughter of Karna, she reflects on the moment of her courage: "Yes, now I remember. Yes, it was then, at that moment, that I became steel, my courage against men was born. As long as a woman has faith in the decency of men, she will not gain strength and courage against them" (Parva 217).

It is interesting to note that Draupadi's equation with her husbands after the dice game episode, especially with Yudhistir, totally changed, "earlier she was awed by him, but now it appeared that he was afraid of her" (Parva 215). She discovered Bhima's pure, unrefined emotions and developed a strong friendship with Bhima. Despite her biased fondness for Arjun, the equation changes as Arjuna gets Subhadra as a wife, exclusively for himself. Like Kunti, she is well aware of the power dynamics

in society between men and women. Angelica Malinar observes that "gender relationships are defined by marriage and other kinship ties, which in turn reflect the status of the partners in the social hierarchy" (80). While analyzing the 'relational notion of gender,' she observes that men-woman relationships are analyzed in terms of their relationship and in terms of the social roles they take up. Therefore, oppositional binary relations between genders based on fixed and defined attributes cannot be accepted as relationship changes according to the change of contexts and situations (Malinar 79). Since Yudhisthir loses his kingdom, his position as a king is lost, therefore, the social role expected from a Queen no longer applies to Draupadi, as she is no longer in that socially accorded role of a queen. Again, social norms and hierarchies do not apply in the forest, which is why the relationship between Yudhishthira and Draupadi possibly changes. The power dynamics also alter. It is because of that Draupadi argues with Yudhistir in the *Aranyakaparva* in the epic, she criticizes and questions Yudhistir's manliness at his indifference/unwillingness to fight the Kauravas. The retold novel explores her subdued anger and frustration with Yudhistir's inaction and passivity. Malinar asks a question in her article "Arguments of a Queen": that since the situation changes after the dice game, how can Draupadi be only a pativrata wife of Yudhistir without being the queen?

The relationship between them turns cold. She remains a pativrata woman. Patton observes that being pativrata is a two-way street in which her duties, devotion, and power exerted from the position make it dialogic. Therefore, Draupadi, being a pativrata, is fraught with polyphonic voices. She feels liberated from the bond imposed upon her by her mother-in-law and rediscovers herself, "I am a free Person under way

of thinking (Parva 225). the empowering voice of Draupadi is heard towards the end of the novel when Kunti, desperate for Pandava lineage, urges *niyoga* to be undertaken by any of the three daughters-in-laws. Draupadi thunderously raises the question, "what does it matter if this lineage dies out? ..." mother, how can you who came to this lineage as a daughter-in-law talk like that" (Parva 840)

In the context of contemporary times, Kunti and Draupadi cannot be identified as merely female or feminine or feminist; they have displayed their tenacious strength and inner courage, faced the situations, and exerted their power and influence within a male-dominated system through their gentle yet firm nature. They could be seen as the 'torch bearers' for women in the contemporary time without getting tagged either as feminine or pure feminist. These two women have wrestled against typical socially sanctioned normative female psyche and female sexuality and enabled themselves to resist, shape, and change their social situation and oppressed conditions. Both Draupadi and Kunti are not just 'listeners'; they observe, think, evaluate, weigh, and choose. The capability of self-choice, self-control, and self-determination mark these two characters. Stephanie Jamison observes that these "females whose control of legal niceties or strategic planning far surpasses that of them who surround them" (17). Laurie Patton's observation that Draupadi's comments and observations are not 'monochrome statements of a pativrata, but rather various voices… which alternate between fierceness and meekness, savvy and servitude, authority and submission" (104).

The dialogic selves of these characters, for example, Kunti's personal/social self as a daughter, mother, queen, avenger, when interacting or getting engaged to an

external position or her social relation with her father, children, king or the royal customs, and the Kauravas respectively, the two selves are bound to negotiate, respond, cooperate, oppose, agree or disagree with the external and in that process self is in the process of making, breaking and reconstructing. Similarly, Draupadi as a wife in relation to the Pandavas, as a daughter to Drupada, as a daughter-in-law to Kunti, as a queen to Yudhistir, as beloved in relation to Arjuna and Bhima, as an avenger of her humiliation in relation to the Kauravas are multiple selves interacting; and as they engage both outside the self and inside i.e. in the mind space, a self speaks with polyphonic voices and conflicting situations bring meaning. Therefore, there is no essential core self, be it a male or a female, so there cannot be a fixed gender or gender-related identities. Neither a man's self is bound by masculinity nor a female self is bound by femininity, the many selves within a self constitute a person. The self of a character contains many voices, and the self is constructed through the dialogue of many voices. These women should not be seen in the light of feminism; rather, they should be evaluated and studied through their arguments and utterances from their own unique circumstances (Black, *Dialogue with the Mahabharata* 118).

The central male characters in the novel lack the polyphonic nature of their voices; it may be because the author's understanding of the characters limits the multiple voices and possibilities, and the authorial voice takes over. However, the dialogic relation between the epic and its retelling *Parva* sheds light on some pertinent aspects regarding Yudhisthira's idealized dharmic statements, not-so-idealized actions, Bhima's pure emotionality, and friendship with Draupadi. Bhyrappa's treatment of Yudhisthir is of "a weak character who could not resist the temptation of gambling"

and loses everything. Bhyrappa engages with the epic to find answers to his questions, "Did he not have self-control? Could he not learn and rectify from his own experience? Could such a character get the respect and affection of his wife and brothers?... Vyasa calls him Mahatma…But apart from his learning of the ancient lore, there is very little to make him a strong and integrated character… Apart from being the Jyestha, which was due to the accident of the birth, he has no achievements either in war or in the management or in solving a crisis…". The epic has focused on Bhima's physical strength, manliness, anger and gluttony and, lack of pragmatism, and philosophical knowledge without going much into his marital life, emotional weaknesses, relationship with wives, sons or brothers etc, in comparison to other central male characters like Yudhistir or Arjuna. Bhyrappa revisits Bhima with a more human approach, reflecting his strength and weaknesses, and impulsive nature and childlike mind who sees things as they are without dharmic or adharmic coating on them.

Draupadi's emotional compatibility matches with him as she says, "Bhima, you are the only person in whose presence weep freely without inhibition". Bhima, the alpha male with supreme muscular strength, is actually a man of pure emotion, and his attachment to Draupadi is not based on any sense of authority and social hierarchy. he is always keen to keep her happy. while differentiating his relation with Rakshaka's wife Hidimbi and with Draupadi, Bhima feels amazed to discover that Draupadi, though "a real helpless female, a true Aryan damsel, and yet it was impossible to disobey her wishes, and I felt that the primary goal of my manhood was to protect her, punish those trying to violate her modesty and to fulfill every one of her demands. Salakatankati, however, made no such demands on me to demonstrate my manhood,

and I had no occasion to fulfill them. Now, I am off to seek her help…" (Parva 135). The above passage may be read as a sampled example of the husband as the protector of the wife. However, if it is read carefully, Bhima has a tone of respectful surrender while talking about his wives. He is well aware of the sin of leaving his first wife despite her repeated requests. He acknowledges that marriage to Hidimbi was a pragmatic move by her mother and brother to stay hidden in the jungle among the Rakshasas, and Kunti has never accepted her as daughter-in-law. His observation about his elder brother is critical. "Dharma is chicken-hearted. not like mother who is more of a man than him. is it because he is a coward that Dharma wears the mask of moral rectitude and self-righteousness?" (149)

Thus, *Parva*, the fictional retelling of the epic Mbh, has consistently challenged and questioned the general understanding of gender, and its multi-voiced attributes are constantly reflected both through intra- and inter-textual dialogues.

The Pregnant King and Gender Fluidity

> There are stories of men who become women, and women who become men, of men who create children without women, and women who create children without men, and of creature who are neither this, nor that, but a little bit of both. It is common to either deny existence of such fluidity in our stories, or simply locate them in the realm of the supernatural or point to law books that, besides endorsing patriarchy and casteism, also frown upon queer behavior (Pattanaik 12)

The Pregnant King by Devdutt Pattanaik is an example of a fictional retelling of a minor and marginalized character from the epic, which questions the existing social codes, norms, and conduct in terms of gender. A normative society tries to conform to the notion of gender binary, and based on that, power dynamics are constructed. Those who do not fall within the set hegemonic standard are considered threats to society as aberrations and kept at the margin. However, the question is if gender-based identities are so airtight and compartmentalized. Pattanaik digs deeper into ancient literature and tries to find answers to these questions. In the exploration process, he dilutes gender distinctions while questioning the social practices and hierarchical gender-based power structure. With an intention to deconstruct the complex domain of gender in the epic narrative, he shuffles everything about masculinity, virility, and femininity and dismantles the binary of sex-gender system. This section tries to show that an androgynous identity is created as the self tries to negotiate between the two extremities of gender, paving ultimately a way for the celebration of plurality in genders. Such acceptance of gender plurality facilitates subverting the fixity in gender and gender-based identities.

The social expectation of man being strong, masculine, and devoid of softer emotion is contrasted with women, the softer, physically and emotionally weaker sex. "the Mahabharata is one of the definitive cultural narratives in the construction of masculine and feminine gender roles in India…" (Brodbeck and Black 12) and yet the epic also underscores the provisional and tenuous nature of gender-based identities. Normative gendered identities and their expressions can be challenged through the 'gender-bending' characters from the *Mahabharat*. There are examples of gender

transformation like Arjuna's temporal transformation as the dance instructor Brihannala at king Virata's court, the Kashi princess Amba's rebirth as Shikhandini who later turns into Shikhandi, Krishna becoming Aravan's bride for a night. In the Indian scripture, there is a reference to *Ardhnarishwar*, who embodies both Shiva and Parvati in one body with physical and emotional attributes. In the epic, through these characters and the story of Yuvanashva, Vyasa has touched upon the uncomfortable zone of transsexuality to create ripples in the normative social structures with a rigid attitude towards gender. However, such portrayal also proves the existence of openness in accepting the third gender in ancient Puranic times. His foresight to bring reference to such characters in an ancient social structure conveys that a biological man may have a feminine, nurturing, motherly personality, whereas a biologically female may be a warrior by heart.

Judith Butler's idea of the performative nature of gender observes the dynamic nature of gender as one constantly negotiates gender norms as laid down by society (*Bodies that Matter*, 94). *The pregnant King* debunks society's fixed binary structure in terms of gender and upholds human conduct, which may not be normative otherwise. By addressing this contemporary issue of ambiguous gender identification and how society has silenced such characters, turning them into legends, Pattanayak has actually engaged with the epic in a dialogue to address a very contemporary aspect of the performative nature of gender and its provisional nature. The novel is an exploration of society's conscious effort to obliterate all such behaviors and norms that violate or challenge the established social structure:

…thou shalt not speak;

thou shalt not show thyself…

ultimately thou shalt not exist, except in darkness and secrecy…

do not appear if you do not want to disappear" (TPK1).

Society tends to accept that gender identity and biological sex are integrally related - a male being masculine and a female being feminine. Judith Butler calls such acculturation of body with gender a "punitive consequence", which means "those who fail to do their gender right are regularly punished" (3). By engaging with the story of Yuvanashva, Pattanaik allows his imagination to stretch, and thus, a burning contemporary gender issue is being taken up. He explores how society consistently tries to curb and even silence behavior that does not conform to or violate the binary structure. Simon de Beauvoir's famous observation is that one is not born a woman but becomes a woman as society considers him, the subject, the Absolute, and her, the other (*The Second Sex*). She implies that gender identity is an externally acquired phenomenon through "repeated stylization of the body" (2) to categorize males and females. The category of woman is defined in terms of the dominant subject position of men while relegating the other as an object. If passivity, irrationality, emotionality, the reproductive body, and childbirth define a woman, the male is defined as "active, rational, incorporal and more akin to mind and thought … more complete, more dominant than the female, closer akin to casual activity" (Llyod 27). By dominating over the other/ the object, men, the subject can be superior. King Yuvanashva, who was an ardent follower of the man-woman dichotomy and the characteristics

associated with it, accidentally entered into a grey zone between man and woman. Naturally, the fixed gender system and power dynamics associated with it experience initial confusion, but society soon returns to its established structure of distinction by punishing the deviant one as an aberration.

The king yuvanashva drinks a magic potion prepared by black magicians to impregnate his wives. As soon as he gets pregnant, having drunk it accidentally, he slips into the zone of ambiguity, experiencing the emotion of a mother in a man's body. His life of tribulation begins as he tries to negotiate his relation to the child both as mother and the father, a "fractured sexual and gender identity". Such fractured identities are considered aberrations in society; nobody talks "about such things, nothing to see, and nothing to know" (5). The king's childhood friend Asanga considers it unnatural and outwardly and non-human. The king's 'mother, Shilavati, desperately waiting for her grandson, demands immediate destruction of such an unnatural conception, "What if it is a monster? A parasite… cut it out. Get the monster out of the body" (6). Nurturing a life inside a man's body defies the definition of a human identity, and therefore, he must be silenced or pushed to the margin.

Motherhood is essentially a female attribute, according to social norms. Motherly emotion, a softer emotion, lies with the female counterpart, which is very different from the emotion of a father. As soon as the pregnancy of the king is confirmed, his right to live as a human seems to be taken away. Despite being the king, he was kept in confinement from public eyes. Initially, the news of the birth of his son was kept hidden; he was prohibited from entering the women's quarters where the child was kept and exhibiting any kind of maternal emotion. "Let motherhood remain with

the women", declared Shilavati, to adhere to the heteronormative codes of the society (the prescribed gender roles individuals play), which controls the power structure and gender hierarchy in the society. Heteronormativity is defined by Todd Weiss as "a power to define our place in the hierarchy, to control those below us, and to be controlled by those above us… To step out of the hierarchy is to lose power and control, to lose congruity. To separate sex and gender is to disassemble the coiled binary structure from which our power, control, and sense of congruity derive." (8) The rigidity of prescribed gender roles supersede the worth of the child's life. Initially, he was forbidden to breastfeed the child; however, finally, the king was allowed to breastfeed in secrecy after a lot of negotiation. The king's first wife, Simantini, is declared the mother of the child in a royal felicitation ceremony. Simantini asserts that "people see what they are shown." Her statement validates Foucault's discourse on truth, power, and history, how politics controls the truth of history, how inconvenient social truths are tampered with, distorted, or erased from history to avoid inconvenience and maintain socially sanctioned gender hierarchy, what is referred to as 'suppression through oblivion" (11-13).

Stories such as Yuvanashva are rarely found in the social document as they could be used as resistance to normative precedence and are kept hidden or rarely documented. As Yuvanashva negotiates his position as the mother of his child's birth mother and his position as the king, the son, and the husband, he starts looking for stories that can validate his position as the mother and the father. The stories he got to hear are the contemporary stories of Arjun's experience during agyatvas at the Virata kingdom as eunuch dance teacher Brihannala, Shikhandi's transformation of sex from

female to male, Krishna's transformation as Mohini, Iravan's widow, and some legendary stories like Aruni the god of dawn who experience both fatherhood and motherhood as Ila. In his effort to seek resolution to his maternal filial experience, he looks for someone who could be a historical instance to validate his emotion. But, history rarely remembers such singular cases that deviate from its homogenizing and universalizing tendencies. Arjuna does not want to recount his experience during that time, as it was terrible to have a man's heart in a woman's body. Krishna's transformation as Mohini was not shown to anyone in the public. Basically, such stories are kept hidden, and recounting such experiences is forbidden. Even bards feign ignorance of such stories. If anyone wants to share their experiences, society has its ways of choking those voices. The story of Bhangashavana, which Bards have conveniently forgotten, is the only person who experienced both motherhood and fatherhood in his lifetime. Listeners do not appreciate such stories, and soon, they become mere imaginations of poets.

Both Shilavati and Simantini warned the pregnant king, who wanted his child to call him mother, against such a scandalous wish would have dire consequences; either he could be a man, the king of the land and the father of the child, or he could be a mother, a female trait and lose the kingdom. When the king wanted to claim both fatherhood and motherhood, Simantini counseled him that gender roles are fixed and confined to their respective boundaries and such shuffling of roles is not possible: "to be a mother you must be a woman. Are you saying you are a woman Arya? if you are a woman you have no right to sit on the throne. (20). She requests him, "let the world

see you as it wants to see you. A great king with three wives and two sons. Virile and strong and obedient… Be a father. Leave motherhood to me. I am your wife". (22)

King Yuvanashva's character study is also interesting because his voice and character attributes are not monochromatic. He has taken multiple positions and exhibits polyphonic voices, forming his dialogic self. As a young prince, he admired his mother's efficient ruling, prospering the kingdom after her husband and father-in-law's death. He also inculcated jealousy about surpassing her acceptability among people. To avoid gender transgression, Shilavati used to do her work from the inside and not placing herself in the position of a king, which meant for men. Despite her success in running the kingdom, she is seen as a dutiful daughter, a loving mother, and a devoted wife, the positions only a woman can be endowed with. The moment he became king, he decided to sideline his mother's strategic, people-savvy mode of governance and take up the authoritative way of functioning as a ruler, maintaining the gender hierarchy in the society. It was during this time that he passed the judgment of burning Sumedha and Somvati alive as they tried to play with the gender roles and were not ready to accept the original socially sanctioned heterosexual relationship.

At this stage, the story of Somvat and Somavati needs to be told. Somvta, a young Brahmin boy who impersonates himself as the wife of Sumedha, his childhood companion, attends the cow-giving ceremony of Yuvanashva to manage a cow for the bride price for getting married. The fraud was detected, and they were put into prison. The crime they commit is on two fronts, i.e., to cheat the royal family and pose as a fake married couple. Somvat, in prison, regretted his manhood and wished his sex to be transformed into a female. Magically, his wish was fulfilled, and he was endowed

with womanhood. When the case came to Yuva's court, the king dictated that as Somvat was a man, he had to marry a woman. But given the present changed circumstance, it was unacceptable to Somvat, now Somvati. Despite caution from their well-wishers, they refuse to surrender their current marital status. And the king punished them to be burnt to death. The main reason behind the judgment was his view that such shuffling of gender and flexibility in gender identities could not be accepted and accommodated by society. As a king, his duty is to punish such people sternly to convey the message to others that society considers such cases as aberrations. King Yuva proclaims, "The dharma shastras say that roles and responsibilities of a manava are determined at birth by his biology… you are born a man… you are forever a man" (25). Ironically, the king who perpetrated the law of fixed gender identity so vehemently finds himself in the same position.

When he was looking for validation and social acceptance, Simantini reminded him, "The world must not know that you are an aberration. They will cast you in the same pyre into which you cast those two boys" (26). However, the final and ultimate rejection comes when his son refuses to call him mother. In an extremely disparaging tone, Mandhata, the son dismisses Yuva's maternal identity and says, "Nothing had changed. The conversation in the maha-sabha had not taken place." (28). His son, Mandhata's obsession with social codes and gender identities, is so strong and unflinching that when Yuva decides to renounce the kingdom and accept his new truth, he is not moved and refuses to address him as "mother"." The name 'Mandhata' means conventional, his action justifies the meaning of his name. The novel ends with social ostracization of Yuva and his ultimate deification. In the public eyes, he became a case

of psychic derangement, and he seems to be fighting alone with himself and the world until he accepts the truth of his gender ambiguity: "I am not sure that I am a man, I have created life outside me as men do. But I have also created life inside me, as women do. What does that make me? Will a body such as mine fetter or free me?"

His failure in getting acceptance from his family leads him to a self-imposed banishment. Soon, he realizes that he will be one of those stories "soon be forgotten" (29) as society does not want such stories to be remembered as truth. His story will also be forgotten like a fanciful construct. At this stage, bards tell him the story of Illa or Bhanashavana as he is now suitable to accept the truth about gender:

> "We have one last story for you… a story we never told you. The story we never tell. The story that has never been told, except by Bhishma to the Pandavas before he died. The one that Arjun said that he forgot… we finally have an audience who will not laugh…(30)
>
> Illa, who was by birth a man but under a magical spell, turned into a woman. Despite his effort through the blessing of Shiva to undo the spell, it could not be revoked. Therefore, God decided that his sexuality would change with the waxing and waning of the Moon. He will be a "male on all full-moon days and all female on new-moon nights" (31).

According to this arrangement, he could experience both motherhood and fatherhood. But as society can't take this as a normative arrangement, it either deifies or demonizes the person, taking away the human attributes from such characters. Illa also becomes Illeshwara, the deity to be worshipped, and Illa, the human, is excluded

from human history. The bards predict a similar fate for Yuva that, just like Illa, his story will be erased from the memory of human history.

The present Mbh retelling uses an almost unknown character to discuss a very important discourse on gender and its performative nature. A self cannot be fixed with gendered identity, a self is in the process of making while engaging with other voices of the self, that makes it dialogic. A man like Yuva who was the epitome of manhood and perpetuator of fixed gender norms and identities, experiences the emotion of a woman, the motherly feeling and refuse to remove that traits from him even after tremendous pressure from the family and social standard. The novel can be read in terms of multiplicity of gender ideology, and challenges the notion of gender with being born as male or female biologically. However, one important aspect must be mentioned that all the examples of sex change happened in the Mbh and also in the novel are due to some magical incident and not as normal or natural happenings. We need to understand the limitations of such a narrative of the past while reading in the 21st century, but the provisionality and performative nature of gender is recurrently found, if not wholeheartedly accepted, in the Mbh. Despite the humiliating connotation associated with such gender-shuffling characters in the Mbh, it must be remembered that these characters are associated with central stories and central characters in the epic. The retellings allow them to flourish more from contemporary time and context and a dialogue happens when a reteller decides to retell the story from a new perspective, rendering it a new meaning.

Conclusion

The chapter studies that identity based on gender in the epic is fluid, contextual, and not stable; this instability of gendered identity has rendered enough scope for the Mbh retellers to explore and enter into the minds and selves of these characters, placed in various situations. The multifaceted layers, positions, and voices of these characters have explored their 'dialogical self' "to show how gender is constructed not only through the binary roles of male and female but also through a series of multiple roles within both male and female" (Patton 98). A self is always in the process of formation in relation to others, always in dialogue with social selves. By entering into the mind-space of characters, the retellings explore the dialogical selves of the characters who, in different contexts, echo certain conventional power dynamics and occasionally challenge and contradict The chapter explores that neither masculinity nor femininity are monolithic, rather they are conditional, fragile, and contextual. Despite an apparent celebration of masculinity, *paurash*, *putra*, *vira* in the epic, it was never homogenous, as women were not devoid of the masculine attributes. They are not binary but complementary, like *Purusha* and *Prakriti.*

In Bhyrappa's literary fiction *Parva*, men are not so masculine, women are not so feminine, and the traditionally expected gendered roles are challenged and subverted. Ambiguity in dharma also problematizes the monolithic attitude towards gender**.** Yuvanashva from *The Pregnant King* sensitizes humankind that the soul is singular, and the body is functional and performative. His story of internal and external conflict with society, his ancestors, and himself as he struggles to accept his truth. Once he accepts his truth, the conflict within vaporizes; he renounces the material world and

moves to the forest. Thus, the novel, revisiting a minor and hardly visible character from the epic and Puranas, challenges the conventional binary understanding of gender based on biological birth, showcasing a multiplicity of gender ideologies.

Traditionally, seen as the epitome of manhood and upholder of rigid gender norms, Yuva, the protagonist, undergoes a profound shift, experiencing emotions typically associated with motherhood. The novel raises questions regarding heterogeneous engagement, transgender issues, conflicting identities, ownership of the body and mind, and most importantly, what is it to be a woman trapped in a man's body or vice versa? Perhaps the novel's ultimate message is to accept the self in its plurality and be with the strong impulses of one's soul. Individuals must have the freedom to determine their own sex and gender. A being must not be defined by the sexual differences of being masculine or feminine. It is a process of being always in transition. Pattanaik, by blending myth with reality, past with the present, and tradition with modernity, has beautifully explored this challenging aspect of gender-based fixed identities in the 21st century when we all are shouting for human rights, equal rights, and liberation from coercion and discrimination. The artificial categorization of bodies as male and female impedes the celebration of plurality in genders. Therefore, such categorization needs to be revisited instead of ostracization of the person.

Recently in India, substantial legal developments have happened regarding transgender rights in India. The Supreme Court has recognized the rights of third gender and made landmark rulings that impact both the rights and recognition of transgender individuals. In 2014, the NALSA court verdict recognized their right to identify their gender. It ensured the right to equality in social, medical, and economic

support from Govt, and protection under the law from discrimination based on their sexual orientation in employment, education, healthcare, and other areas. Recently, the Supreme Court has affirmed the right of transgender individuals to marry under existing legal frameworks, specifically in heterosexual relationships. This ruling marks a crucial step forward, allowing transgender people to marry in accordance with their self-identified gender under laws such as the Special Marriage Act. These rulings show a growing legal recognition of transgender rights, but challenges remain, especially in terms of full marriage equality and adoption rights for the broader LGBTQ community. Although some rulings have recognized the right of LGBTQ individuals to live without discrimination, key issues like same-sex marriage and adoption rights still await further legislative and judicial acts.

CHAPTER 4

BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES: THE 'RETURN' OF THE 'VILLAN'

This chapter delves into the realm of retellings of the Ashwathama narrative from the *Mahabharat*, exploring how two distinct retellings of two genres engage in dialogue with the source epic text. By critically examining these two retellings, the chapter aims to shed light on the transformation of various aspects of the epic while reinterpreting the ancient epic narrative within contemporary literary, cultural, and political contexts, initiating discussion on issues that are contemporaneous and relevant to the current world. The purpose of the present chapter is twofold: First, to present how the Mbh retellings initiate and engage in productive dialogue with the epic, the *Mahabharat* narrative, due to heteroglossic nature of its utterances which contain more than one voice and multiple layers. In other words, how the authorial intentions and voices get 'refracted' and convey separate meanings and expressions in the texts. The second goal is to address the role of the readers who actualize retellings through their active participation and also the fact that a retelling comes into fruition through readers. Though most literary works may invite the readers to participate, Mbh retellings demand such participation as the new telling is constantly in dialogue with the old Mbh narratives. Thus, readers' meaningful and reciprocal relationship with the retellings allows us to appreciate or critique these retellings in various ways.

The second chapter has already discussed the theoretical framework of dialogism, heteroglossia, and the reader's role in retelling. The chapter will turn to the two texts as examples of retellings of Ashwathama's story from two different yet unique perspectives. After giving a brief layout of the *Sauptikparvan*, the shortest yet the most dramatic, destructive, and provocative *parvan* in the entire epic, the chapter will analyze how the concerned retold texts, the *bhan* (one-act play) titled *The Book of Night: A moment from the Mahabharata* (2008) by Sibaji Bandyopadhayay and the graphic novel titled *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* by Amruta Patil, are in the process of embodying, incorporating and extending the source material and thus, constantly in dialogue with the epic narrative. The readers are a necessary part of this dialogue as they even provide the condition for dialogues to emerge as they question, disagree, and fill in the silent spaces and situate characters or situations in modern and contemporary socio-political contexts. The questions the readers may often prompt through the retellings may not have an accompanying or definite answer. Each caters to the role of an implied reader and also to keep the dialogue alive without surrendering to definiteness.

The present chapter focuses on the character of Ashwathama, and the story around him constantly raises curiosity among the readers. Conversation, interaction and questions continue to generate in the minds of the readers across generations, sometimes appropriating the traditional narrative and occasionally challenging the conventional notions. Ashwathama's character has always intrigued readers and scholars due to its association with terror, revenge, justice, and the question of forgiveness. Ashwathama, who has been almost ignored/sidelined in the entire epic,

suddenly becomes the central actor in the *Sauptikparavan* and changes the destiny of the Pandavas while changing his destiny. It is easier to denounce and be oblivious of a character as the villain of the narrative, giving him almost no opportunity to voice his side of the story or his basic right to tell and to be heard by others with or without justifying the horrendous act of terror he committed. As a result of this total oblivion, it may be noted that almost no attempts were made to tell his story or put Ashwathama as the central character in a work. The villain cannot get a space to talk to because it might vitiate the social, political, and ethical ambiance, and the lives and minds of people may get corrupted and polluted by the venomous story of a villain. However, as time changes, perspectives differ, broadening the possibilities of openness towards the story and the characters, seeing the villains as humans instead of deifying or demonizing them outright based on their good or evil deeds. The retold narratives do not attempt to comprehensively retell the Mahabharata. Instead, its purpose is to strategically reclaim the presence of a marginalized character by offering a fresh perspective and a unique aesthetic that challenges the established norms. *Sauptik* creates an intimate psychological world of Ashwathama that thrives within the ordinary external reality.

The grandeur of the epic tale allows the readers to retell, recreate, and analyze the story of Ashwathama, who, despite being confined in the *Sauptikaparvan* as the most villainous character of the epic, becomes the catalyst to change the path of Pandava's destiny all by himself and thereby changing his own destiny forever from being a *Shivansh* (a part of the Shiva) to the eternally cursed immortal. Having allowed Ashwathama to resurface with his side of the never ending story of inconsolable

suffering owing to the eternal punishment of Krishna is itself a deconstruction of the hegemonic voices and positions. The purpose of this deconstructed reading is never to justify his horrific nocturnal act but to reevaluate his actions, analyze the possible motivations behind his actions that led to his downfall, and also what other issues can be learned and highlighted which are highly relevant to the present time and circumstances.

Readers challenge traditional narratives or conventional pre-conceived notions by engaging with fresh and diverse perspectives. It sheds light on the main narrative and illuminates the present by letting the readers participate in the character's experience and then view him and listen to him, thus allowing them to share his life of pain or suffering. Thus, the engagement with the story, participating in his actions, and sharing the deeper ingrained complexities of the character initiates a conversation on contemporary issues like Terrorism and questions pertaining to justice and forgiveness. In the process of engaging with these questions, readers can grow ethically, evoking an ethical self with an ethical insight that can further talk about issues relevant today.

The *SauptikaParvan* in the *Mahabharat* and *The Book of Night: A moment from the Mahabharata* (2008)

The Book of Night: A moment from the Mahabharata (2008) is a one-act play by Sibaji Bandyopadhyay translated from Bengali to English by Ipsita Chanda. The play's original title in Bangla is *Uttampurush Ekbacha: Ekti Bhan*(2002), which literally translates as "First Person Singular: A Bhan". A dramatized performance or reading of the play was done in 2001 by the author at The Seagull Arts and Media Resource Centre, Kolkata. The title suggests that this is a '*Bhan,'* a theatrical

convention. Bharata Muni mentioned Bhan in the 20th chapter of the *Natyashastra*. *Bhan*, also known as *bhanika*, refers to a classical dramatic form performed by a single actor focusing on a single character who enacts his memory, thoughts, emotions, and actions. While describing his experience, he speaks in the air, *akasa,* and pretends to listen and respond to fictitious characters, making appropriate gestures. This is also called '*Akasa bhasita'* or, if translated literally 'flowing or reverberating into the air from the air'. It falls in the pantomime genre or mimic plays without real and visible presence and dialogue of others. It is predominantly presented as a monologue that engages with imaginary listeners and audiences. The aim of a *bhanika,* which usually draws inspiration from mythological and historical figures, is to evoke specific rasas or emotional responses from the audience, allowing it to be an intense and intimate performance experience. The art of *Abhinaya*, encompassing facial expressions, gestures, vocal modulations, and body language, conveys the character's emotions and the narrative, shedding light on the character's inner world and deep psyche.

Dialogic possibilities in the genre

A monologue can be dialogic and have multiple possibilities due to its internal dynamics and audiences' engagement. Monologue can be seen as a manifestation of a dialogized self that can possess multiple voices and perspectives. Therefore, when an individual expresses and engages with various voices and contradictory viewpoints within his/her own consciousness, a monologue becomes dialogic. A character conveys different linguistic and ideological codes through monologues in his thoughts and expressions. These conflicting voices and codes interact and challenge each other, creating a dialogic tension within the monologue itself. It may contain intertextual

references where the character draws references from the past, cultural references, or other texts. Monologues can also incorporate the character's engagement with the voices of his mind, imaginary voices of an absent persona, and interact with them. This kind of engagement with others in absentia introduces a dialogic dimension into the monologue.

Bakhtin has emphasized that the meaning of a text is never fixed; instead, it is a negotiation between the author and the readers. In monologues, the audience also actively participates in the meaning-making process. The readers are not passive receivers of meanings; they actively infuse their voices and thoughts into the interpretation and responses to the monologue. In a theatrical performance, the character on the stage may directly address other characters and audiences, blurring the distinct line between monologue and dialogue. The other members on the stage or in the audience won't speak, but their body language and facial expression may convey their mental, emotional, or psychological status to carry on with the interaction. Finally, the visual elements on the stage setting and non-verbal cues may enhance the dialogic nature of the performance.

In the epic, he was cursed to be lost, not to be found ever with a clue, and he will always be around on the face of the earth as the most pathetic character. The reason Bandyopadhyay has chosen to return Ashwathama on the stage through a "distant, long obsolete dramatic genre" could be possible because Ashwathama is eternally banished, cursed to live a life of loneliness with no companion to share his grief or grudges. Therefore, if Ashwathama has to convey his emotions and shed light on his decades-long lonely, arduous physical and emotional journey, it is the compulsion of both the

writer and the character to choose a genre like this which does not have a dialogue with others per se, and yet conversation goes on at several layers. Bandyopadhyay writes, "It is not choice but coercion that has made him opt for the soliloquy, the dated genre of the *bhan*. Residing in a non-dialogic void yet desirous of dramatising himself, he has had to give up on the prop fundamental to theatre- dialogue" (Afterword 104).

Bandyopadhayay views the story of Ashwathama as multifarious, even heteroglossic. It is a story that does not have a closure, fixed or defined meaning. Thus, the story travels to different regions of the country as folklore, as a legend, as a fallen hero, or as a murderous villain. The story of Ashwathama thrives with open possibilities for numerous interpretations. Bandyopadhyay articulates his version of Ashwathama, uniquely filling in gaps in the source text and tapping into multiple possibilities. He has not deviated from the epic character and the narrative per se associated with it. However, he has changed the focal point of observation, simultaneously making Ashwathama present and absent. The viewers/readers could not resolve the conflict till the end if it is Ashwathama who has reappeared on the face of the earth to share his angst and deeper conflicting soul or is it an actor who is impersonating himself as Ashwathama and expressing his own version and understanding of Ashwathama in front of others? The answer remains hazy as resolution is not the key to going forward, but engaging with the thoughts and voices of the actor or the character and interpreting them in the context of the past and present in parallel is the way to move toward the future.

Is the play devoid of dialogue? The answer is 'No'. The play engages in a dialogue with the *Sauptikaparvan* of the *Mahabharat* through the 'reappearance of the

disappeared.' The stage allows a space to an unnamed speaker whose mind seems to be confined in his distant world, and as he speaks in a disorderly manner, it seems he is talking to some distant past characters with no meaning and end to his neurotic brooding. As the spectators start making sense of his disorderly, disjointed, and garbled speech, full of luminous poetry and flamboyant vocabulary, his concealed identity is revealed accidentally to the spectators. However, the mystery of the person remains unresolved to the last as it is impossible to determine if the man on the stage is the eternally doomed character Ashwathama in real or an imposter or an actor playing his part on the stage. Despite uncertainty about the credibility of the actor/player on the stage, dialogues at several layers continue as his monologue reflects multiple voices: conflicting voices of his own self, his imaginary response/conversation with other characters, especially with his maternal uncle Kripacharya. Although the speaker on the stage claims to be the classical anti-hero, the suspicion in the mind of the audience never fades away. By keeping his identity hanging, the playwright opens the space for anyone who can fill in by retouching the story, connecting the fragments, and constructing a new sequence. The play as a Mbh retelling, in the words of Bandyopadhyay,

> … dawns on the assembled gathering only after the speaker unwittingly discloses his identity that he has been, all along, constructing a jigsaw puzzle out of a well known tale. But, in so doing, he neither adds to nor subtracts from the original…He manifests his inventiveness neither by introducing insertions nor by causing extensions but only by retouching the tale. But his retouch does

> not disfigure; it merely breaks the plot up into smaller units and, redistributing and reconnecting the fragments, conjoins a new sequence (Afterword, 105)

Despite the act of atrocities committed by him in killing the sleeping soldiers and the foetus, it is not that his memory has been erased from the collective subconscious of people. The epic may have erased his memory to keep the epic *Mahabharat* a sacred one. However, he is not forgotten from the psyche of ordinary people, and even in the subconscious, they remember this pathetic, lonely hero. Bandyopadhyay writes in the "Afterword" of the play:

> …that a large section of Indian householders perform the daily ritual of sprinkling oil on the ground before bathing…the reflex action a token of (forgotten but frozen) remembrance of Ashwathama's continual suffering; the gesture of goodwill evinces the wish to mitigate the agony from the loss of his jewel, an agony that still consumes him. (99)

The play opens with an open-ended tone; it reveals a nameless speaker who may be just anyone in the crowd, a margin on the text, or a side text whose neurotic mumblings, rapid shifting and shuffling from one thought to another, use of 'torrential prose', and the occasional gust of poetry in the unfathomable or incomprehensible expression appears like lunatic vagabond, trapped in a moment of the past. As he enters on the stage, he "enjoys a complete monopoly on the stage over its speech and action" like a 'totalitarian' leader until it crumbles (Bandyopadhyay, A Return to Now 473). As he continues his verbal quibbles without any traceable unfathomable action with his mind tethered in some distant past, he becomes traceable or recognizable to the readers; the unnamed gets a plausible name, the side text becomes the text, and the

margin shifts towards the centre. Despite the apparent recognition, the speaker remains trapped in his mind in a dislocated land, and without any hope of redemption, he continues to dialogue with his mind and the characters of the invisible past. It is his speech and utterance that reflect his actions in the past, the immovable infinite journey of the present, and the promise or lack of it in the future. It is not his action because there is almost no action in the play, but the promising nature of his speech, along with body language, makes him and his action tractable.

The monologue becomes a dialogue; the nameless character gets a name, the invisible characters of the past get possibly identified, the singularity of voice, he enjoys apparently on the stage, is contradicted by a polyphony of voices both within and outside; the singularity of the person also seems contradicted by his fractured selves as he interacts with himself and the invisible interlocutors like his maternal uncle Kripacharya, Shiva, the god of destruction, Krishna, the sole responsible entity for his present dismal condition and also not so relevant but visible onlookers who are provoking him with their silence or whispering or hooting. Their body language hints at their disbelief and disapproval of the person's story. As he speaks, he speaks in the first person singular mode, but his singularity is inherently plural as he continues to echo the voices of others and of some distant time; the coherence and continuity of speech breaks as the linearity of thought breaks, shuffles between past thought and present moments, mimics his uncle, mocks Krishna's path of dharma, gets provoked by the audience/onlookers, laments the degeneration of verbal language and its lack of wisdom, rues the loss of grand epic time and its elevated discourse.

As a person who has been walking on the earth for countless ages, it can be assumed that his invisible presence has been witnessing the degeneration of human society, the degradation of human values, and innovative forms of ruthless terror and violence in society. However, he could be the first perpetrator of such terror in human history. Moreover, he witnessed the gradual degeneration of language, culture, syntax, meanings, etc, with the passage of time. He is dislocated from the classical age and placed in the contemporary time, but his memory is fixed in the broken past, which results in his inconsistent self. He is Ashwathama, the most pathetic character in the *Mahabharat*; he has been cursed to live an eternal life of disfiguring disease, desolation, and destituteness. The shift of the character from a classical magical and elevated world of divine powers to a naturally degenerated human world opens up space that Bandyopadhyay fills in as he threads a sequence through his second coming.

The play is designed in such a way that it is full of deviations from the epic narrative. The moment the character is displaced from the classical past and becomes the focalized voice of the night of the massacre, rampant psychological digging happens, and the readers get to see him from a new light, which the author has also tried to experience. The shift of the character from the last Kaurava commander to an unknown lunatic mumbler allows the playwright to touch upon the old story to weave a new thread dealing with some of the current and contemporary realities of human life. Each time when a reteller tells the story of Ashwathama by recharacterizing, reorienting, and redeploying him in a new situation, the readers will pause for a moment (*Birati* in Bangla or interval in English translation) to think, revisit his perspectives, speak his unsaid words, fill in his silences, experience his agonies and then go on.

Bandyopadhyay revisits a moment from the epic *Mahabharat*, the *Sauptika Parvan*, or *Book of the Night Attack*, the tenth book of the epic. The present play is one of the few retellings of the epic's Ashwathama episode. Some of the essential retellings of the Ashwathama narrative are *Ashwathama's Redemption: The Rise of Dandak* in English by Gunjan Porwal in 2018, *Ashwathama: Mahabharat ka Shapit Yoddha*in Hindi by Ashutosh Garg in 2017, *Mahabharater Pratinayak* in Bangla which is a collection of essays on some of the *pratinayakas* or roughly translated as anti-heroes of the epic by Nrisinga Prasad Bhaduri, Krishna Udayasankar's book *Immortal* in 2016 is also a retelling of Ashwathama in the modern context which will be made into a trilogy by Phantom Films production. All these retellings have attempted to retouch the epic character of Ashwathama, recharacterize it, relocate it in a new time and age, and thus enter into the psyche of the epic hero or anti-hero who was cursed to be immortal and experienced many lifetimes of killings and bloodshed and degeneration of human civilization. The retellers ask a dominant question of whether he is the actual perpetrator or just a scapegoat in the hands of the gods. By committing the crime, he has become eternally cursed to be on the outskirts, or can the outskirts build their own center by highlighting the hypocrisy and conflicting power centers?

Bandyopadhyay writes in the Afterword, "Having carved out a space, scintillating in its emptiness, *The Book of Night* invites us to retrace our path and return, once more, to the Mahabharata, the most fecund of all of India's textual resources."(Afterword 102)

Sauptik Parvan is the shortest *parvan* in the entire corpus of the epic, the *Parvan* falls when almost the Kurukshetra war is over. The incident is neither an inside

part of the war, as Duryodhana was already defeated and wounded, waiting to die, nor can it be outside of the war as it brings utter destruction and devastation on the side of the Pandavas. It remains on the margin, on the outskirts of the Kurukshetra war, but the episode contains the most bleak and harrowing episode of killing the sleeping soldiers of the Pandava sides in their camp. The episode is so upsetting that it can even tremble the heart of the most nihilist today. As the great battle of Kurukshetra is at the threshold of completion on the 18th day with the supposed victory of the Pandavas, it seems the attack has been ceased, war has been paused, and soldiers may now take rest. The Pandava side, to celebrate their victory, arranged a celebratory feast. As only three soldiers were alive on the Kaurava side: Kritavarma, Kripacharya, and Ashwathama, it is hardly expected that a fresh set of killing bonanzas could ensue and jeopardize the future of Pandava soldiers in a single night of terror unleashed by an avenging Ashwathama.

To understand the massacre of the night, it is crucial to study Ashwathama's character, his relationship with his father, Guru Dronacharya, and the duo's relationship with the Kauravas and the Pandavas. At the time of choosing a side in the great battle, Drona despite his fondness for the Pandava brothers, fought in Duryodhan's side for supposedly two reasons, one for his professional loyalty with the Kuru kingdom, and the second, for his fraught relationship with Drupad, the king of Panchalas. As Drona took charge of the Kaurava army on the eleventh day after the fall of Bhishma, he planned the battle design called chakravyuh, which killed Arjuna's son Abhimanyu, a young teenage warrior. Drona's dexterity in the science of war makes him almost invincible in battle. However, a devious trick played by the Pandava side makes him

renounce fighting. His exit became more humiliating as Dhrishtadyumna, the Panchala prince, and the Pandava commander-in-chief dragged him by the hair, beheaded him, and humiliated the dead by tossing his severed head. Thus, Dhrishtadyumna committed the unethical act of humiliating the dead, which is against the norms and ethics of war.

Drona's dead spirit may not be an inciter to Ashwathama's fury, thirst for revenge but as Bandyopadhay observes, "it is Drona's spectre that looms large in *The Book of the Night Attack*. Perhaps in *Shalyaparvan*, it was this discreet spectre that guided the footsteps of the last three Kaurava warriors towards the pond in which Duryodana lay dying "(Afterword 83). It is possible that having sensed Ashwathama's genuine thirst for revenge against the Pandava's trickery and avenging the father's unfair and humiliating exit from the battlefield, Duryodhana, defeated yet not decimated, offered the charge of the commander of the Kaurava army to Ashwathama, reminding them of the honour of the battle. It is at this point, *Sauptikparvan* begins.

The journey of Ashwathama with his two comrades towards the Pandava camp in the dark night itself is significant. His restless heart finds a way of avenging as he witnesses the murderous act of a night owl which devours the nestlings of crows in their sleep. The sight of the satisfied owl, which could return victorious after slaying its enemies/victims, inspired Ashwathama to devise a murderous plot to massacre the Pandava soldiers. He knew it well that in a fair battle, he will never be able to vanquish his opponent and quench his thirst for revenge. A treacherous response is logically justified for giving a fitting reply to the unfair act committed by the dominant side.

Moreover, his treachery will still be less sinful as provocation is involved, and his treachery is a response to the trickery of the Pandavas. Arindam Chakravarty has elaborated on the psychology of revenge in his article 'Prasanga: Pratishodh' (15-41). While discussing the 'psychology of revenge,' he talks about how psychology tries to defend an act of revenge that is indefensible and tries to put it under the umbrella of morality. When one takes revenge, one commits an act against the perpetrator of the first injustice and thus tries to get even with the first perpetrator. Chakrabarty emphasizes that the act of revenge can never be even with the first aggressive act against which revenge is sought. The act of revenge will always be less as the action has an element of provocation, which the first act of aggression lacks. Chakrabarty continues to add that if the act of revenge is far more hostile and murderous in its effect than the first aggression, the target of revenge may retaliate more strongly, and thus, a spiraling chain of violence may ensue. However, an act of retribution can neither restore the loss nor balance out its aggression; it simply brings new loss over the former; therefore, Chakrabarty argues that no morality is involved in revenge.

Ashwathama's act of revenge in killing the sleeping Pandavas cannot be morally justified as retributive justice. Moreover, Pandava's application of trickery to make Drona renounce his weapons and thus be killed can also be provoked by an earlier aggression in *Chakravyuh*, designed by Drona, and the murder of a young teenage warrior Abhimanyu, the son of Arjuna. Thus, the act of terror can never be original and never be justified. The epic showcased a spiralling chain of injustices that built up the Kurukshetra war between the two clans, and at the end of the war, both sides experienced the pain of severe loss and the agony of defeat.

Ashwathama, before sharing his treacherous plan with the two sleeping comrades, he presents irrefutable reasons to convince himself of his action:

He said unto himself:

> This owl teaches me a lesson in battle. Bent as I am upon the destruction of the foe, the time for the deed has come! The victorious Pandavas are incapable of being slain by me! They are possessed of might, endued with perseverance, sure of aim, and skilled in smiting. In the presence, however, of the king, I have vowed to slay them. I have thus pledged myself to a self-destructive act, like an insect essaying to rush into a blazing fire! If I were to fight fairly with them, I shall, without doubt, have to lay down my life! By an act of guile, however, success may yet be mine and a great destruction may overtake my foes! (33)

The impeccable reasoning and logic he provides to himself are beyond refute. Reasons are given as sets of logical arguments to make a justifiable decision. It is like following the designated path to reach a deserved conclusion. Decisions based on reasoning and arguments are far different from deciding on the spur of the moment, which is impulsive and illogical. His elaborated reasoning is far from any impulsive reaction. To strengthen his logic and argument, he fused the content of emotionality as a grieving son and a duty-bound disciple as he refers to an unfair way of killing his father, who happens to be his Guru; as a son and a disciple, his promise of retribution seems more justified at the moment. However, Nrisinga Prasad Bhaduri, in his book *Mahabharater Pratinayak* (2009) observes that his attempt at moralizing brings out his own 'moral depravity' and hollowness in morality. Arindam Chakrabarty has also suggested that the psychology of revenge cannot have a moral orientation (discussed above).

The moral and ethical depravity of his self in the decision to kill the sleeping Pandavas becomes more apparent as he shares his plan with his two comrades, who find it too overwhelming to comprehend it initially. As they recover from their initial shock, they vehemently deny participating in such an immoral and treacherous act of murdering the Pandava soldiers in their sleep, which would be against dharma and righteousness. A long verbal argument ensued between the meek uncle and revenge-thirsty nephew. However, Ashwathama's already resolute decision refuted his uncle's ethical argument on the grounds that Pandavas and their counsel had shown foul play and trickery to win the battle, and therefore, it was justified to play foul play against them. Kripacharya's counsel of dharma fell deaf to the ear of Ashwathama, who was not prepared to listen to any sane counsel. Being obsessed with the murderous intention of murdering the sleeping Pandavas, he approached the Pandava camp.

The journey that he initiated at that point has never ended for him. The reason he cited may be considered the murder of reason or slumber of reason. It is not that he lacks the ability to think logically. His acumen in logical argument can be shown in a few episodes of the epic, such as *Virata Parva*. However, his logic wrapped with intense emotional agony makes it sharper in this context. He flaunts his depravity as a strong logic for revenge against the dominant side of the Pandavas and their counsel Krishna. In the Nietzschean vein, depravity is the weapon of the defeated; therefore, by flaunting depravity, he has already decided on his fate of being defeated (Anirban Das citing Bandyopadhyay's essay "A Return to Now"). Having murdered the sleeping Pandava soldiers, ironically, he murders his own sleep and gets cursed never to have restfulness and resting sleep in life.

The terror inflicted by him is still remembered as the murder of sleep(ing). The moment of Sleep suggests the moment when one is unconscious and not ready or aware of current happenings. Terror activities even today are planned as and when others are unaware of its happenings. Anyone who kills his opponents in sleep/unknown to imminent danger murders the innocence of sleep. The sleep analogy can also be used as putting all ethics, morals, rules, and reasons to sleep, as one commits such a heinous terrorist act of genocide. Sleep analogy is used in two ways. Ashwathama, the perpetrator, kills the sleep(ing) men by putting his own reason to sleep and, in that process, loses his own sleep forever. The man on the stage himself laments, "What price I had to pay for that momentary lapse of reason" (28)

He announces his victory as soon as his weapon kills the seed of Arjuna's grandson in the womb of Uttara. By temporarily killing the last sign of Panadava line, he claims that retributive justice has been established and that he has proved himself to be a true warrior to the Kuru side and a responsible son. Having paid his debt as a warrior and a son, he feels the satisfaction of his victory only to be conscious of his eternal defeat.

> …That silver of life, that fertilized egg - once it has been destroyed, that's it- peace! Peace! Peace in the world of the living and the dead, the moving and the still, the kuru line relegated to oblivion, my father's death avenged, the debt incurred at my birth repaid. Free, free am I, liberated- the circle closes, exit from the cycle of birth, no regrets, no sorrow, no sadness, no weariness, no sexual seekings destroying my composure. … My moment of victory - my moment of loss. (THN 56)

The conflicting self of Ashwathama has repeatedly surfaced in the play, which is rarely explored in the epic. However, the scope for discovering complexities is always there. His moment of apparent victory becomes the moment of eternal loss: loss of sleep, restfulness, and companionship. He is relegated to a walking dead who can neither live nor die and will always be hanging somewhere in between the two worlds. Is it the reward of a victory one can ever hope for?

It may be noticed that the epic tries to show that Krishna's curse to Ashwathama happens not because of the act of nocturnal terror unleashed by the last Kuru commander with the blessing of Mahadev but the eternal curse was slapped on him as he changes the direction of the great Brahmasira weapon to the womb of the Pandava woman with the sinful intention of killing the unborn life. Drona's son, filled with wrath, replied, '… this weapon of mine shall fall on the foetus that is in the womb of Virata's daughter, upon that foetus which thou, O Krishna, art desirous of protecting.

Ashwathama's cruelty of killing innocent unborn new life is unforgivable as Vyasa, the great preceptor, also supports the curse. The emphasis of the criminal act seems to be clearly shifted from the nocturnal terror to the feticide, which will be ultimately reversed through Krishna's blessing": "The foetus will die. But being dead, it will live again and have a long life!"

It is the cruel act of the perpetrator that was punished. Before the action is implemented, the sinful act of thought is committed in the mind, which is capable of being a vicious and nefarious thought. Therefore, not only his actions but also his criminal and adharmic mind were also punished. The perpetrator's punishment is duly justified at this point. However, a genuine concern may trouble modern readers that if

the criminal act of feticide was reversed by divine intervention if the act is undone, the sinful intention remains unfulfilled, and the duration of the eternal curse could have been limited/revised/cut short. Secondly, if the divine interventions in the form of Mahadev and Krishna are the actual players in destroying or reviving lives, Ashwathama becomes a mere instrument in the hands of the gods or divine authorities, a mere scapegoat. In the play, Ashwathama, on the stage, asks this question repeatedly.

Ashwathama's journey towards the Pandava camp, who were drowned in their sleep after an evening of revelry, is wrapped with several questions. On his way to the camp, Ashwathama experienced something grotesque which froze him in the situation. He witnessed a luminous figure of infinite dimension with sparkling eyes, scantily clad in tiger skin, adorned with snakes in hands and chest, a cave in the place of mouth which erupts volcanoes. Being frightened by this formidable gargantuan image, he started worshipping it. The grotesque figure reveals its true form, the Shiva, the god of destruction who blessed Ashwathama and entered into his body. In other words, Shiva empowered Ashwathama with his devastating power, which would help him carry out the massacre of the Pandava armies, killing all the important soldiers of the Panchala army and the five sons of the Pandava. The attack and the pitiless, unmajestic killing of the Pandava heroes like Drishtadyumna, Shikhandi, and the five sons of Draupadi can put all genocidal histories to shame. As the last Kaurava commander, through this orchestrated night attack, he succeeded in reducing the number of Pandava soldiers to seven: the five Pandava brothers and Krishna and his friend Satyaki, who were not spending the night in the camp. The report of the nocturnal expedition relieved Duryodhana from the pain of defeat, and he died peacefully.

Bandyopadhyay writes in the Afterword about the effect of the two *Brahmastras* colliding, "...a terrible beauty was born- lit up by two earth destroying missiles, the sky bleached sparkling white. If Vyasa , the arch-historian, had not intervened, history itself could have ended on that fateful day"(Afterword 90). As advised by the elders, Arjuna neutralized his weapon, while Ashwathama, unable to neutralize his, changed its direction to kill the foetus in Uttara's womb, the only heir to the Pandava family and the Kuru legacy. Krishna saved the Pandava lineage by reviving the life of the fetus, but Ashwathama became the perpetrator of two heinous crimes, the crimes of foeticide and the crime of genocide. For the crime of destroying the stability of the present and possibilities of the future, Krishna punished him by taking away his jewel on the forehead and "... to three thousand years of ceaseless wandering, … never be accepted into any community, never be allowed the comfort of any form of companionship. Perennially on the move yet arrested in a frieze, Ashwathama's presence hereafter would only speak of absences… (Afterword 91).

The use of the Brahmastra, also known as Shiva's Pashupata, is the ultimate weapon for destruction of the earth and its existence; the use of the ultimate weapon without an iota of compunction will turn the world into ashes. Therefore, Ashwathama was not only charged with the genocide of the sleeping Pandava soldiers, but also his thirst for revenge would have been responsible for destroying the ultimate creation as he lacked every sense of pity, compassion, and reason and justified the attack on the unaware or unconscious opponent. Abhimanyu and Uttara's unborn child can also symbolically signify future generations and possibilities. With his attempt at feticide, he tries to destroy future possibilities and hope, which becomes the tragic reality of his

cursed life as he remains locked in a time dimension, left with his grim past, the cursed present, and with no hope for the future.

It is in the context of Ashwathama's cursed immortality, the first genuine orchestrator of genocide in the 'recorded' history of humanity, the epitome of permanent absence, the perennially invisible character becomes visible, enters the stage articulating his experience of degeneration of past glories, hollowness of words and decay of human values and values of life. The author chooses Aswathama's story to retell because, on the one hand, he remains the perennial symbol of committing the first genocidal terrorism in the history of humanity, and therefore, is abhorred; on the other hand, his tragic and pathetic downfall without any hope for salvation is relatable to a modern man. His thirst for revenge against the Pandavas for killing his father, his manipulation with the subtleness of dharma to serve the purpose, his questioning and not following the path of Krishna, the dominant and privileged path and yet following it in a reverse way to serve his purpose and ultimately, the resolution to decimate the opponent at any cost are the concerns modern beings are not unfamiliar with. Ashwathama is that blessed yet infinitely cursed one person who has witnessed both the glory of the past and the gradual decaying of the present. His inability to interact with the viewers/onlookers is not only because of a changed time, space, and diction but also because of his confinement in the past. In order to have an effective dialogue with the other, both need to be on a similar plain, which is not possible in this case; therefore, Ashwathama's words come as meaningless rambling, and the onlookers shoo him away as direct engagement is not possible. Ashwathama complaints against this impossibility of dialogue:

> What days are upon us? Education, taste, grace – nothing! No sense of deference. Those days, …words had their value, they meant something. You had to build the edifice carefully, bit by bit, brick by brick. … And today! Copy bits and pieces from this one's words, paste it into that one's text, …no beauty, no discipline, just a mess of meaningless sound. This language, this behaviour, this mindset- all termite-ridden, rotten, rubbish…. Everything is grown blunt. Detached. Plain- and ever so simple. Mere cacophony. Just shouting. (THN 17-18).

The cacophony he experiences outside is more visible inside his head and heart. As we read the play. It is more mental internal cacophony than physical or external. He is seen impersonating and mimicking his maternal uncle's 'real highfalutin' speech of wisdom. His consciousness is divided between two distinct voices, one which acknowledges his guilt and his own responsibility behind his damned life, and the other which justifies his adharmic action and tries to stand as the eternal opponent and challenger of Krishna's path of dharma. When he laments the loss of pristine cascading language of the past and questions "But am I what I used to be?" He is referring to his pristine glory of immortality, being "THE REPOSITORY OF SHIVA-SHAKTI, THE POWER OF SHIVA," which is now 'polluted,' 'distorted' and reversed by his action and Krishna's curse. He literally feels sorry for himself, calls himself a 'corrupt creature', 'a sinner of the worst stamp' and laments, "I've been walking for thousands of years- walking-walking. No chance of a pause….skirting the edges, flitting along the margins, wandering unto death. And watching, watching—endlessly" (THN 19).

The melancholic soul of Ashwathama, with no chance for succour, suddenly converts into one who sees his victory in the ever-increasing violence and terror in

human society, he being the eternal symbol of genocidal terror, and a challenger of Krishna's path of dharma or the symbol of adharma. His crooked satisfaction is to see Krishna's failure to establish dharma and righteousness in the world even after punishing the perpetrator with an eternal curse. He cries out with unbearable joy and laughter:

> Janardan! Open your eyes! Witness the cunning trick of time…, you see aeons into the future: You… made such meticulous plans- but…? What happened then? You isolated me, ostracized me to keep your cherished Mahabharata pure, but all your calculations, alas, came to naught! ... you tried to stop me but such an ass you made of yourself! Messed up big time! Ended up posting me in every nook and corner of the state…, look in any direction you wish and you'll find me there. By the strange machinations of time, today I am the universe- - *bhavamaham bhavoham!* I feel so bad for you… really. After all, you are the support and strength of the common man. (THN 21)

Ashwathama seems to mock at Krishna's effort to establish dharma by punishing him, the symbol of terror and violence but in reality, the degeneration of dharma is so acute and ever-present in contemporary society that the symbol may have been punished but the act of terror and violence becomes a cruel and the most resonating reality in human behavior. The symbol of adharma becomes the universal reality. Time has played its bitter trick by conflating the concept of dharma and adharma in human mind. If a part of his self gains conceited pleasure in challenging Krishna, in his hidden desire to defeat Krishna, in considering himself the repository of the power of Shiva while the other half of his soul is aware of his character's

disgusting nature of false self-importance, narcissism, and jealousy. He remembers his "uncle's words of warning, 'Self-love will be your nemesis, son'…Absolutely, Unerring diagnosis. I understand, now. Limbs rotting, skin withering, vision diminishing- I can hardly walk…this eclipse is eternal…it will never end"(25)

Ashwathama's voice of regret is unmissable in the play, which the epic does not delineate. He is aware of his never-ending desires, which have become instrumental in his downfall. Having been born in an impoverished Brahmin family, he followed the path of his father Drona, i.e., to adopt the Kshatriya profession of a warrior. As a Brahmin, his sense of superiority among the four varnas is unchallenging, while as a warrior under the Kshatriya king, his position and authority can easily be challenged. His experiences with poverty and struggle for survival by adapting to new situations since childhood have made him a complex character. His survival instinct comes from his Brahminic background. The survival of his own family members and his own survival under any circumstance becomes the primary goal, which is unlike a Kshatriya who is ever-ready to sacrifice in a battle. Once the nocturnal carnage is over, the desire for personal survival becomes so necessary that the deadly weapon, which was never used for any bigger achievement in the war, is being used when he fears being killed by Bhima. He may not be innately a nefarious human being with a criminal mind. However, his upbringing gives birth to a complex, cruel, and jealous character who wishes to fulfill his desires at every cost without caring for right or wrong. Ashwathama's voice of regret comes out as he remembers, "You said, 'Don't run into the fire like an idiot insect, child.' I didn't listen. When have I ever? Listened? Every

day I desired newer and newer fuel to light the fires of desires, something to add to the heat. … That night, too…" (THN 24).

The voice of regret, the desire to challenge the mask of dharma and righteousness of the opponent side, and the fear of his eternal downfall- all these voices are simultaneously popping up in the character who claims to be Ashwathama. While his mind is occupied with the past moments of oscillations like to kill or not to kill, the reason behind the terror or the lack of reasoning, the bombastic words of advice from the uncle make him impatient. He experiences 'momentary lapse of reason' (28) that caused such an irreparable loss in his life.

It is the Kaliyug that makes his reappearance and the second coming possible. Ashwathama proudly announces, "Never mind what they say, it's my turn now" (49). With the decline of dharma, what is remnant in the human society and the modern world is him, the adharma personified. The only relation that characterizes this world is between the hunter and hunted, the prey and the victim, the "owl-and-crow-chick sort. And that's what the Ashwathama principle is all about."(49) The way he universalizes himself and his symbolic reference to violence and terror seems extraordinary and yet perhaps not founded on the reality: "Am I not immortal, living from age to age, never to die? Am I not the fuel for another's pyre, the everlasting fuel added to the fire? Am I not he who personifies the end?"(49) The metaphysical questions he asks do not require answers, as the confusion is inherent in the series of questions that he asks about him being the epitome of universal.

Ashwathama, having wandered for thousands of years and experienced the curse of his eternal alienated life, questions Krishna's path of dharma. In the epic, he

could not question Krishna or others for why he has been turned into a scapegoat for all the adharmas done on both sides. The questions he could not raise, the objections he could have had at the time of the curse, and the silent acceptance of it have made him restless. The question of broken war ethics and the inevitability of the curse may arise in the mind of the readers, too, which is not addressed in the epic, but the play tries to engage with the thought:

> Yet this was my chance, my time to pay it all back, to have my say…a few thousand years of rivalry between us, long unresolved conflict - Krishna the accused, and against him stand I - Ashwathama, the accuser. How long has it been - so many summers, winters, autumns- I wait for a face-off (62)

His justification for the apparent resolution for revenge, unvoiced dilemmas in his heart, ethical naivety of his maternal uncle, his butt of sarcasm on Krishna for being the flag bearer of dharma and playing with its subtleness and most importantly, questioning how justified Krishna's curse was- Ashwathama has obliquely touched upon all these issues in the multivoiced monologue. His entire monologic speech gets dialogized as he voices forth the ethical tension to kill the sleeping Pandavas or not to kill, the right path of dharma as conceptualized by the individual behavior based on one's varna, profession and stage of life or Krishna's apparently biased path of dharma.

His own words betray his position as a challenger to Krishna as he calls himself a 'shadow,' 'thorn', and 'paw-mark' while using beautiful 'flowered fragrant words' for Krishna. He wants to feel content by thinking, " Ashwathama may lack profundity, but he sure packs a punch. I may not make the flowers bloom but I sure as hell can sting"(65). When he says that "only I am concealed from Krishna, beyond his reach-

dweller in the cavern…" it is not difficult to understand the agony of conscience or some sort of regret in his words, and yet, he calls himself "free, unique, discrete, independent, *swayamsevak*." The extreme oscillation and unresolved conflicts in the minds of Ashwathama do not let him "experience the orgasmic outburst" which he was expecting to achieve through this reappearance. He feels trapped and shackled and unable to escape not only on the physical space of the stage but also in his mental and psychological space. All the preparations, rearrangements, and the reconstruction of his side of the narrative seem flat as he experiences no luxurious pleasure of foreplay rather at this point, he seems breathless and suffocated and questions himself, "Am I not Ashwathama, the furnace of fury personified, the symbol of the times?"(67). His self-love, self-pity, and self-importance get questioned by none other than himself as he gets out of the intoxication of revenge and depravity and the realization that he could kill not the natural enemies, the Pandava brothers, but their young children. He realizes that his heroism is incomplete, or his purpose remains only partially fulfilled without the slaying of the brothers. To him, the punishment he gets in return seems far graver than the sin he committed.

In the play, it may be noted that Krishna's actions and words become the butt of Ashwathama's criticism. Rivalry with Krishna, the divine incarnation of Vishnu, may uplift the stature of any opponent. It may be implied that Ashwathama, who considers himself blessed with Shiva's power, wants to position himself as an opponent to Krishna, the human incarnation of Vishnu. By executing the Pandava brothers under Krishna's protection, Ashwathama could have achieved the glory of a great hero or been an equal opponent to Krishna. Perhaps it is because of such possibility of action

in the future, much before the battle took place, he tried to bargain the disc of Krishna (*Sudarshan chakra*) with the Pashupati weapon gifted by his father, Drona. He could not have succeeded in uplifting the disc of Krishna; the very effort and the tricky bargaining scheme suggest his ambition and his intention of presenting himself as the equal, if not rival of Krishna and to kill Krishna with the disc, which he himself reveals.

At this juncture, another important point needs to be discussed. In the play, Ashwathama's 'second coming' is fraught with many questions and possibilities. 'The Second Coming,' the poem by W.B. Yeats, suggests an apocalyptic world-space in which every preconceived notion is broken or challenged, and new truths are getting their heads out, questioning one or any universal truth. The new truths may not destroy the prevailing previous truth, but they make their existence feel, and both new and old truths can coexist not for a resolution but for a meaningful existence and interaction. The second coming of Ashwathama may not have caused the falling apart of the notion of dharma as propagated in the epic or the dismantling/cripple the followers of dharma, but at least his reappearance brings up a few issues for discussion. His actions of nocturnal terror and feticide cannot be justified, but the eternal curse of no chance for absolution may be debated and discussed. The man concerned may have been "limited, edited, rejected" and silenced by the supposed followers of dharma, but his reappearance brings new perspectives and new questions.

It must also be noted that Ashwathama enjoys some space of empathy in the collective psyche of people for his tragic downfall. His neurotic rambling may appear nonsensical, but as readers and viewers of the play, some of his sarcastic references to Krishna's ultimate justicedemand further discussion and dialogue; when Ashwathama

asks "The power of Vasudeva's yoga had revealed to him my plans. If Keshto keeps you, who can kill? Madhava skillfully subtracted the five brothers from my equation" (71). If Krishna had the premonition of the massacre, why didn't he interfere or stop it anyway? By not interfering, Does Krishna also become partially responsible for the killings? Ashwathama repeatedly demands an explanation for this question. He also reminds the viewers that before the battle commenced, what Krishna taught to Arjuna about life and death; the 'River of Death' shown to Partha with the gift of divine sight on the field of battle: "Who is not there in the River of Death? Which great inhabitant of Bharata has been left out? Whom has he excluded, whom has he not consumed early in the day, Krishna, the Mighty-armed? (73)

Ashwathama questions his agency of killing anyone. If most of the Pandava and the Kaurava heroes are destined to be killed in the war, as shown to Partha by Krishna, he is nothing but a mere agent in executing the divine premonition of perishing the Panadava heroes in the dark of night as Arjun has been in killing the great heroes of the Kaurava side. Again, if he is a mere agent, why is he carrying on the burden of eternal punishment? How justified is Krishna, in that case? Who is to be blamed for a crime committed? Anybody who commits the crime is the criminal, but is it not a part of the divine plan? By universalizing himself and his actions to anybody committing any crime, he tries to negate the gravity of his nocturnal terrorist act. He says:

All the murders have happened before they occur! They are slayings and executions, but no executioner! Though he slays, he slays not-.... So, no regrets. So, did I, too, like Partha, murder the already dead? Did I bring my cutlass draw upon a

curse? Ashwathama is not outside the circle then, not a left over? He is part of that vicious cycle, … All murders are preordained,...(74)

Toward the end of the play, it is tough to pinpoint who the man on the stage is speaking to. An actor playing the role of Ashwathama who fails to impress the audience with his performance or, is it the historical legendary Ashwathama who tries to justify his act by sharing his side of the story in a non-linear fashion but remains trapped in his own story and the, therefore, fails to get the attention of the viewers. Ultimately, he wants to be remembered by the audience for his story. However, he fears that he may be a failed hero of the epic or a failed artist on the stage. The black hole he refers to is beyond any beginning or end; it is a journey one undertakes, and creates experiences but without any permanent impression or impact on the world. Ashwathama, as the character of the great epic in his second coming, tries to look back at the situation, tries to justify his action, and puts the blame on the opponents. While doing so, he unknowingly expresses his hidden agony, secret desire to be remembered as a hero, to feel empathized and understood, and most importantly, to be "a part and parcel of the Mahabharata".

The disparaging soul of Ashwathama uses logical mind and reason to justify his murderous action, and a realistic evaluation of the situation prompted him to focus on justifying the deception and manipulation of the rules and norms, sacrificing all ethics of war and ethics of life, the use of logic (or lack of it) to justify one's depravity is highly relevant and relatable in the present time. In every terror activity in the modern days, ethics get sidelined by narrow self-interest followed by the logic of fear, insecurity, or depravity. The perpetrators of a terror act fail to show restraint for

achieving or fulfilment of their own desires and selfish interests while sacrificing compassion for the victims and the lives lost in the terror act. A terror attack is not a full-fledged frontal war; rather, it is a hidden act, committed without being known, an illegitimate and unseen act against a legitimate side.

An act of terror is often branded as a mindless and senseless act, causing a total eruption and distortion/manipulation of ethics. Ethics, in this context, does not simply allude to morality or moral obligations; ethics refers to imagining the opponents/others as human beings that exist in one's being/self. By imagining, it means knowing or 'understanding' the opponent/other through the possibility of reaching out (Spivak 91-94). In contemporary times, the night terror attack committed by Ashwathama is one such example of senselessness, and when the ethics of imagining others as human lives has gone for a toss. He fails to recognize his victims/others as inevitable remains of his self, and by mercilessly killing the others, he kills a part that constitutes the self. The violent streak in Ashwathama gets escalated as he charges his Brahmasira to kill the Pandava brothers, and Arjuna's Brahmastra confronts him; the moment has the possibility of destroying the world and exterminating the human race. However, imminent destruction is prohibited as the weapon is deflected toward the womb/fetus, which symbolizes future generations and the continuation of the human race. The fetus, being the not-fully-grown-human, becomes the other and can be sacrificed for a greater good, which is to prevent the extermination of the whole world.

Interestingly, it must be noticed that terror may be branded as a mindless act; it is not devoid of reason and rationality coupled with emotion to counter the dominant while following the rules of dominance. In contemporary times, all the terror activities

and the subjects associated with violence and counter-violence follow the triadic network of reason, logic, and emotion. And finally, an act of terror should not be seen as a singular activity and the legitimate side should not be absolved of all the responsibilities; it is necessary to address and not to ignore the reason behind the action of the perpetrator without justifying the action. It is because of this that new discussions have emerged; Ashwathama's story has been engaged with voices of accusations and justification, and apathy, and empathy simultaneously can be heard in different creative and critical domains.

Graphic Novel by Amruta Patil:

In the second section of the chapter, the second text that will be discussed as the retelling of the epic in the version of Ashwathama is the graphic novel titled *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers (2016)* by Amruta Patil. She is a pioneer in mediating and reimagining the epic tale in the verbal/visual medium while preserving its essence. Patil's creative retelling of the epic has emerged through two sequential graphic narratives: Adi *Parva: Churning of the Ocean (2012) and Sauptik: Blood and Flowers (2016)*. She considers that Both narratives are not created 'by' her but come 'via' her, thus distancing herself from the authorial agency. Both works intersect between telling and showing, image and text, classic and popular, ancient and modern.

India has a rich storytelling tradition; the narrator's act becomes more important than the author's because stories are carried forward through narrators. Unlike the epic, which has a box-within-box narrative technique and thus the narratorial voice shifts from Vyasa to Vyasampana to Ugrasava to Sanjaya, in the novel, Patil uses *Sutradhar* or thread bearer to carry the thread of the story forward. As a postmodern author, Patil

is nothing more than a presenter who presents the story without having any authorial magnanimity or omnipotence. The thread of the story is being initiated and carried forward by two marginal characters, Ganga in the *Adi Parva* and Ashwathma, Drona's son in the *Sauptik*.

In this section of the chapter, Patil's second sequential work, Sauptik, will be studied in its visual and verbal interplay, analyzing how the epic tale is retold through the perspective of a unique peripheral character, Ashwathama, who plays the role of the storyteller and carries the thread forward from the Adi Parva will show how there are constant dialogues between the present text with its source material. Continuous interaction exists between visual images, colors, frames, and verbal codes while depicting the tale of the grand epic in a unique fashion, imagery, and metaphor. There will be constant looking back and forth between the past and present. The past will be looked at to make sense of the present while throwing light on the future.

Unlike the play described in the first section of the chapter, Ashwathama is no longer a rebel or sees his ambitions as justified. He neither uses his reason, logic, or emotion to justify his action nor considers himself a rival to Krishna or the Pandavas. The restless soul of Ashwathama in the play has passed such a long, arduous, lonely journey that he no longer feels protected among other human beings and feels more secure being invisible in the dark or among nocturnal creatures. Therefore, this is not just a physical journey for Ashwathama but also a journey of metaphysical and spiritual transformation, a change of soul, as if Krishna's advice to "use the time well" is fulfilled.

Graphic Novel as a Medium and its Dialogic Possibilities:

The emergence of the graphic novel as a unique storytelling medium is extremely pertinent as it combines visual art with narrative techniques. Bakhtin's dialogic theory offers a valuable lens through which the interactive nature of graphic novels can be explored. As it has been explored in the first part of the chapter on how a monologue can be dialogic, this section will concentrate on various ways in which graphic novels can foster a rich and multifaceted dialogue between author and reader, text and image, authorial intention, and reader's interpretation. The multimodal language which incorporates both visual and textual elements, used in the graphic novel creates a heteroglossic environment in which different modes of communication interact to convey meaning, modify a conventional interpretation, shed new lights and open many other forums for further meaning-making process. The juxtaposition of various linguistic and artistic styles within a graphic novel opens up a space for multiple voices and varied perspectives to emerge, collide, and coexist, enriching the dynamic interplay between text, image, creator, and reader/viewer. Readers with different backgrounds, knowledge bases, and ideological alignments can participate in interpreting and sense-making the references, which ultimately navigates the dialogue in different directions yet 'refracted' (Bakhtin) from a single source narrative.

The visual elements in graphic novels, along with their panels, layouts, compositions, captions, thought bubbles, direct speech of the character, and authorial comments/observations, contribute to the many-voicedness of the medium since one page may contain contradictory viewpoints in sharp contrast to the visual image. Visual cues such as panel arrangements through boxing or unboxing or variations in

art styles, use of color palette, darker and lighter shades, water color or pencil sketch- all these create a rich tapestry, a montage inviting the readers to penetrate, invade the boundaries of the author's vision and engage in a dynamic dialogue and navigating the thread of the narrative. The interaction between texts and images facilitates converging and diverging multiple narrative voices, allowing readers to engage with a varied range of perspectives. The act of engaging with multiple perspectives transforms the experience of reading into a collaborative act or co-creation of meaning. The readers can easily fill in the gaps, make connections, and reinterpret the author's vision and visual and textual elements, allowing a dynamic dialogic exchange between the source material and the graphic text, between the author's vision and the reader’s imagination.

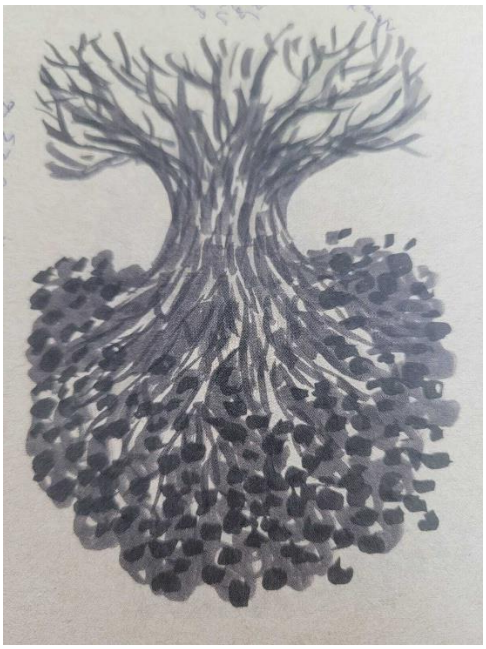

Image 1: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. 1

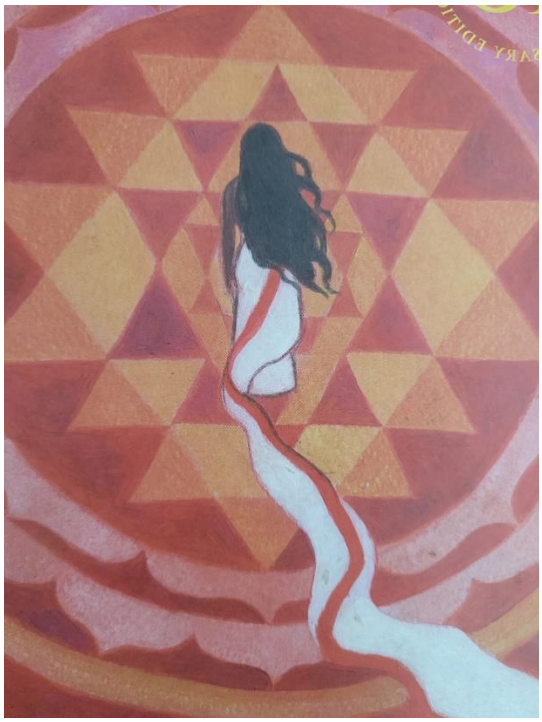

Image 2: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. Cover page

Showing a Retelling: Collaboration of Images and Texts

Scott McCloud in his work *Understanding Comic: The Invisible,* argues that in a comic which is both a form and a medium, has many ingredients like panel, color schemes, caricatures, time-transitions etc., which contribute in producing meaning and understanding comics. He demonstrates that the combination of words and pictures can tremendously influence the art of storytelling. He categorizes some ways through which the words and images can correspond, bond, and coexist:

i. word specific (where the words complete the meaning, the picture is for illustration)

ii. picture specific (image provides the main sequence, words are for background sound or illustration)

iii. duo specific (both words and image correspond and complement each other)

iv. additive (words explain the image and add to it)

v. parallel (images and texts provide independent meanings but are indirectly and symbolically related

vi. montage (words are an integral part of the picture)

vi. interdependent (words and pictures correspond and collaborate as one cannot convey the meaning without the other) (153-155)

The classification by McCloud is more related to comics. However, it is equally applicable to graphic novels, and any number of combinations can exist in a graphic novel, as multiple panels may require multiple ways of showing the story and taking it forward. In a graphic novel, panels are one of the minor units to function as a language to disseminate information and also to reflect the importance of space and the passage of time. The panels, their sizes, and arrangements are extremely pertinent in the meaning-making process. Color is another important factor for meaning-making; the shades of color, the blend of color, the transformation from low-frequency to high-frequency color are used to convert different shades of characters and circumstances in life from the battlefield and its violence to playfulness in life or positivity (Image 3)

Thus, graphic novels as a medium can offer a rich interplay of dialogues between voices, perspectives, and interpretations. When an open heteroglossic medium like the graphic novel is used for retelling the epic tale of Mahabharata from the focalized perspective of Ashwathama, it is bound to be dialogic at multiple levels. The participation of listeners/readers/viewers at different stages contributes to a

dynamic dialogue that transcends the traditional notion of authorship, conventional narration, predestined outcome, and readers' response. Amruta Patil exploits her graphic novels as a space to combine art/images/pictures with telling through words, dialogues, and texts.

The images and visual metaphors, with or without limited verbal codes, retell the story to the readers, rendering it a visual and performative clarity; the use of colors, balloons, a blend of frames, and the size of panels not only enhance the intensity of visual circumstances, it also helps the readers to enter into the characters psyche and situational complexities limited words and verbal codes. Metaphors as a trope are considered fundamental in communicating meanings in layers with nuances. Therefore, verbal metaphors have the potential to provide the experience of visual metaphors and mental clarity in the minds of the readers/viewers. Thus, metaphors play an important role in rendering independent layers of meanings that are fundamental in reading the epic tale which is the result of years of internalization of the stories from *Jaya* to *Mahabharat*.

A work like Mbh, which is considered the cultural compendium of Indian tradition, when retold in a different medium like a graphic novel, goes through a complete structuring and restructuring of signs, their meanings, and interpretations. The section explains the thematic motifs of the characters and situations through the verbal and visual metaphors used in the work. A thorough study of the images, signs and their multiple interpretations will navigate the meaning-making process. When verbal metaphor gives way to visual metaphor, the process creates the space for

alternative meanings, creative texts, and contexts, and thus, a new genre like graphic novels emerges for retelling the epic tale.

A genre usually refers to an "established set of literary conventions" (Shaffer 297), and when an epic is retold in a new genre or a new medium like graphic novels, there will be inadvertently transformation and reconstruction of the narrative. The author enjoys artistic and aesthetic freedom in the reconstruction of the tale, and the author's vision predominates in the narrative and the presentation of the narrative. However, as a reader and viewer, the researcher's interpretation of the text and images becomes a collaborative act based on her understanding and knowledge of the source material, the author's creative vision, and her creative imagination. The dynamic interplay of all such factors facilitates dialogic exchange and continues to create and recreate meanings.

Patil says, "In any case you are not held captive by old narratives. Tales must be tilled like the land so they keep breathing. the only thing you owe allegiance to is the essence" (116). Patil, as a modern 'sutradhar' does not simply create a story based on the epic with pictures; rather she refashions the story while playing with the grand tale, mixing it with the Puranic tale, changing the story's narrator, the venue of narration, the long lapse of time, as "The Kurukhestra war is long over. Ashwathama, warrior with the long unhealing wound, looks upon the worlds he once knew". As a reteller, she tells the story in a different medium and enjoys total freedom and flexibility in presenting her narrative version. She participates in the rich tradition of retelling the epic tale of the Mahabharat while keeping the fragrance of the story intact along with making it relevant for contemporary readers and time as Ashwathama is no

longer situated in the epic period rather, he exists 'now' in the present as a fringe element, roaming around the outskirts of society and mixing with the people who are on the outskirts, losing all the grandeur of the past.

As mentioned before *Sauptik* is the sequel of *Adi Parva*, and the story of *Sauptik* is carried forward by Ashwathama from the narrator of the prequel, Ganga. Ashwathama, who is considered a 'madman' (Patil 141) by the onlookers and listeners, is an audience in Ganga's story. He is protected by Ganga and introduced as the narrator or the 'threadbearer' for the sequel. The word thread bearer does not exist in the English dictionary, however, the word has been possibly used in two senses: one who carries the thread of life or the life span of a being and the thread of the story. A thread can also symbolically suggest an umbilical cord, which connects with the life of a newborn infant. Patil's graphic novels are the creative newborns that are connected by an umbilical thread of the sutradhars. Shivani Sharma writes that "the metaphor for the umbilical cord… provides life force to the narrative itself. These narrators/threadbearers carry the burden of narrating the tale" (7).

On the other hand, as thread bearers of the story, the sutradhars weave the story while seeing it from a distance with a subjective focal point. They see the epic tale as someone who has experienced the relentless flow of life and shows the story to their audiences, "trust the humble storyteller who knows how to unravel the thread…. stay with the story, even when it passes from threadbearer to threadbearer" (4), asserts Patil. The artistic agency and poetic license of the storyteller allows the narrator not to be entirely faithful to the 'original', rather, the retold story becomes the storyteller's version of the original narrative, as well as the life-force behind the story.

Patil, the modern sutradhar, hands over the narratorial agency to Ashwathama as he narrates himself and his journey and urges the world to listen to his version without having any preconceived notions. Patil cautions the readers to avoid preconceptions of any kind rather than experience the story with an open heart objectively (1). The image of the upside-down tree is a metaphor that refers to the importance of perception and the angle from which one sees it without prioritizing one over the other. (Image 1)

*Sauptik Parva*n in the *Mahabharat,* as discussed in the initial section of the chapter, depicts Ashwathama's episode and his nocturnal adventure. However, the title of Patil's novel *Sauptik* does not limit itself only to the story of Ashwathama; instead, it touches upon the central story of the epic without going into the intricacies of multiple threads. Patil begins the story with Ashwathama's moment of physical and emotional vanquishment at the end of the Kurukshetra war, followed by Krishna's curse to be lost in a life of 'solitude' and 'insignificance,' "into strange epochs peopled by strangers"(6) and ends with Ashwathama's moment of salvation and the compassion he long sought for. The entire narrative is a journey of Ashwathama's self, and in between these two points, the central narrative of the epic is appropriated and narrated by him in the flashback method, which includes the birth of Pandava and Kaurava brothers, their hostility, the birth and marriage of Draupadi, the dice game followed by fourteen years of banishment for the Pandavas; while simultaneously touching upon the lives of some other essential heroes who participated and died in the Kurukshetra war which witnessed the defeat of Kauravas and his own humiliating fall from all grace. The cycle of his life is complete, and it is like a long thread tying the other

narratives along. The Sutradhar Ashwathama, in this case, unties those knots for others and tells his version of the epic, clarifying his subject position. Ashwathama looks back at his life - his childhood struggle, his jealousy with Arjun, hidden friendship with the Kauravas, desire to be an ideal son of his father, the trick, he played for avenging his father's killing followed by eternal punishment, getting lost in darkness for ages, his downfall as the 'collateral damage' of the war, his degeneration and denunciation as the villain and non-acceptance by people. The act of appropriating the entire epic narrative from his version reflects his craving for self-importance and acceptance in the epic tale, a position which he has lost with the episode of *Sauptik Parvan*.

Ashwathama's depiction of the story of Brahma and Shiva in the "Outlier" section is an utterance with multiple meanings. The stories are not directly taken from the epic, but they are parts of Puranas, which Ashwathama invokes when looking at his past. The reader engages with the stories to understand the reason why Ashwathama begins his story with Shiva, the god who lives among the scavengers like a hermit in the desert and *samshan*. His subconscious intention is to represent himself as an outlier like Shiva, who is unaccepted, unwelcomed, and can be inconvenient to others. "Would you recognize a god who wore the wrong body?"(13) – the question Ashwathama addressed to his audience refers to this association of his own past great glory, which is unrecognizable seeing his present appearance and gait. Followed by the story of Shiva, it was Brahma, the Creator's message of revelation to the three worlds, depicted by Ashwathama. "Prajapati did not stir. Then he made a sound. Was it a dyspeptic grunt? Syllable of cosmic import?... Da" (25). The sound of the possible word "Da" from the mouth of the Creator is pregnant with meanings of different levels to different

members of the three worlds. The devas interpreted it as 'Daan, charity'; the asuras interpreted it as a 'Dama or restraint… to subdue vain ambition', while the mortals understood it as 'Daya or compassion' for fellow beings, which they found "harder than anything else under the Sun"(25-26). The innumerable meanings and connotations that can be extracted from a single word, 'Da' are symbolically significant because interpretations vary on the basis of the individual world. These three worlds are not necessarily physical worlds but coexist in every mortal being according to their thoughts, desires, and actions. The message the Creator gave away as a way of life is not being followed by Ashwathama, due to which he experienced the fathomless fall from the grace and respect of a warrior to being a coward and creature. Ashwathama failed to restrain his ambition and thirst for revenge and show compassion to the sleeping soldiers or the unborn child in the womb of Uttara, Arjun's daughter-in-law. He failed miserably to become a deva, asura, or mortal with compassion for others.

In the section "Let the Phenomena Play," Ashwathama depicts the birth of Vishnu in the *mrityulok* as Krishna who manifested himself "not as a ruler but as a cowherd. His primary way of relating would not be as warrior or king, but as a love object. He'd be beloved baby, beloved friend, Beloved" (43). The emphasis on 'Beloved' as a verb and a noun is significant to the readers for understanding that Krishna did not participate in the war in any way physically. However, he always sided with those who loved him unconditionally and without any veil, "Come as you are. Or don't come at all" (49). So, it is the true emotion of love, affection and friendship that made Krishna helped those Pandavas. Towards the end of the novel when Ashwathama

asks a question sitting on the land filled with corpses and prey birds feasting on the dead bodies: (Image 5 and 6)

There's something I must ask you…

Why did Father love Arjun most? Why did you?

Was Arjun your chosen sakha because he followed instructions best? Because he needed one-on-one attention the most?

Tell me this, O Krisn, and take the last of my burning away-

What is so great about a man who can only see the left eye of a wooden bird when a glorious forest lies beyond?

Nothing at all (Krishna responds)

The sprawling images in the four pages reflecting the above-mentioned dialogues capture the entire journey of Ashwathama's soul. The page where Ashwathama starts asking the question regarding Arjun is a dark brown shade page in which he is sitting with his side views like a creature with black shadow and with other black creatures like prey birds and grey-shaded dead bodies reflecting agony, restlessness, and the remnant of jealousy and battle aggression in his heart; the dark brown shade changes into an orange shade which is the color of dawn in the next page indicating time-leap. The flower petals on the page symbolize the softening of complexities, initiation of positive emotion, and the possibility of a new beginning; he also gets a visible concrete shape with his eyes wide open, though bloodied due to the blood flowing from his forehead. This complex yet strong visual metaphor portrays

Ashwathama, who is yet to be redeemed of his sins; however, he desires some sort of redemption through storytelling. The next page shows a substantial time leap and changes into green and bluish shades, which symbolize an abundance of positivity and prosperity. This leads into the last page, where Krishna's visible blue face has a kinder eye, and Ashwathama realizes the true relevance of the word Krishna as 'beloved.' (See Image 5)

Before going further, the cover page (Image 2) needs to be translated to refer to the implicit dialogue between visual and verbal codes. If interpreted, the visual metaphor on the cover page sums up Ashwathama's life. The sacrificial altar and the fire in it are the origin of life and the sacrifice of life. Draupadi, the incarnation of Bhoo devi who emerged from fire alter or yagna and, therefore, known as Yagnaseni when insulted, polluted, and humiliated by the Kauravas, destruction becomes imminent. Draupadi's saree, hanging, looks like a thread of life, the umbilical cord connecting to her sons; Ashwathama cut the cord off in the horror of the night as Draupadi's five sons were executed. The female figure may also be Abhimanyu's widow Uttara whose fetus has been killed by Drona's son with his weapon and thus disconnecting the umbilical cord with Parikshit. The killing metaphor is enhanced through dark reddish color, suggesting bloodshed at night and in the war. The flower may signify the foetus, the repository of new birth, and, in this case, the revival of life by the blessing of Krishna. Thus, Patil tells the story of Ashwathama and how his life is summed up visually without creating any hierarchical conflict between visual and verbal mediums of retelling.

The title of the story *Sauptik: Blood and Flowers* and the cover page of the book demonstrate the cyclical affairs that Ashwathama has experienced. It is in the *Sauptik Parvan* of the epic Ashwathama executes the Pandava soldiers and Draupadi's sons in their sleep; he becomes instrumental in killing the foetus in Uttara's womb, the last heir to the Pandava throne with the use of *Pashupateya* weapon, a nuclear weapon equivalent. As a result of this unethical act on his part, Krishna punishes him. The blood metaphor symbolizes death. However, it simultaneously signifies the birth of a newborn wrapped in blood. Flowers may signify new births and new possibilities. The narrative depicts the cyclical nature of creation, preservation, and Destruction of the universe in the form of Brahma, Vishnu, and Shiv as the Creator, Preserver, and Destroyer, respectively. The function of Tridev is also cyclical in nature. Patil beautifully captures it: "Vishnu's was the way of careful garden, Shiv's was the way of the compost pit. To Vishnu, putrefying compost is a potential garden. Shiv sees a lush garden as potential compost… Vishnu- Krshn led Hastinapur to engagement. Shiv-Mahadev led it to dissolution" (77). Ashwathama becoming an instrument in the final dissolution of the Pandavas can be seen as a part of a bigger plan to set the stage for Kalyug to arrive. He becomes a 'Shivansh' in the true sense.

Ganga, the celestial female figure, hands over the thread of the story to Ashwathama, an injured man who struggles to find an audience as the audience leaves him soon unable to bear his horrifying smell and countenance. The drawing made of charcoal reflects the darkness associated with his body and mind as he says, "I can see better in darkness than in light. Light brings clutter. I know the shadows like no other being does" (11). The dark gray charcoal shades in the panels depict chaos, anxiety,

and fear of the unknown. (See Image 4). The black color also suggests the Kalyug, a time of darkness, corruption, and pollution of the mind. The audience and the narrator fail to collaborate as both parties lack trust and confidence in the other. He flees the place and finds his 'unobtrusive companionship' on the outskirts of the *samashan* grounds to share his version of the story. The workers on the cremation ground, the outcasts who are not welcomed in any village gatherings, are the audience of Ashwathama's story. Unlike the villagers who were the audience of Ganga's story, the *smashan* workers are neither afraid of him nor feel abhorred by his dirty, smelly countenance; instead, they were amused by him and offer him a piece of shroud to cover him. After many years, he got his voice back as his audience Langda and Bhainga, the two pyre-keeper men, showed warmth and generosity without rejecting him as a 'madman.'

The narration in the novel simultaneously works at two levels. Patil, as the overarching storyteller, recreates his version of the Mahabharat tale and plays the role of the external narrator, while Ashwathama, the internal narrator, narrates his story to the *smashan* people with more temperance as he says, "I'd have told this story differently three thousand years ago. The events were raw and I, so angry"(36), the angry self which we have possibly witnessed in the *bhan* already. However, the stories are narrated in a piecemeal fashion connecting one with the other thematically and metaphorically. It may also be compared with the postmodern narrative technique called hypertextuality, which connects a new story, and the readers can have an experience of "intertwined structure of cyclical, nested narratives" (Jha & Chandran 379). Through these stories, the novel enquires about the nature and the purposes of

his or her being while the internal narrator tries to make sense of his past life and look for a justification of his ultimate fate and possibly hope for the unachieved salvation in the heart of his audience.

In the same line of narration, he narrates the wombless birth of his parents, Kripi and Drona, followed by Drona's animosity with Drupad and the wombless birth of Draupadi and his brother Drishtadhyumna, the slayers of Drona and the Kauravas. On the one hand, he thinks that the unconventional birth of his parents must have seeped some systemic oddness into him, and because of the proximity with fire/agni in yagnas, therefore, his fiery nature and revengeful traits are possibly ingrained and expected. Poverty is also responsible for his father taking up a Kshatriya job in Hastinapore. He sadly remembers a moment from his past when he cried for milk and his friends duped him by feeding him rice-water. The incident led to a fight between his parents and the cycle of material demands never ends. In his view, as he looks at the past, his innocuous demand for milk caused the epic tale, "had I not cried for milk, mother wouldn’t have scolded father, he wouldn't have gone to Drupad for help. No insult, no vow of vengeance, no Hastinapore, no Arjun"(2016, 32). His feelings for Arjun have never been explored despite the fact that Arjun somewhat replaces Ashwathama as Drona's favorite disciple and becomes son-like, which Ashwatthama could not become despite being Drona's son. Not only was Arjun his father's favorite disciple, he himself used to be surprised to see Arjun's skill,

Not only was his body honed to symmetry in action and repose, he was also ambidextrous. I couldn't take my eyes off him, and I resented him profoundly… Had he not walked off with my father's heart so easily, had we been generation apart or in

different gurukuls, I could have admired Arjun openly, loved him even. I would have been spared the burn of being the rival he barely noticed. Unrequited resentment is far worse than unreturned love. (99)

The jealousy he felt as a young growing-up boy for Arjun reflects his deep-seated psychology, which is possibly the reason for his self-pity and desire to prove himself worthy of his father's son. Such complex psychological phenomena have always existed, but it is today that they are being studied for better understanding, counseling, and recovering from such dark shrouds of emotions. Ashwathama, as he looks back at the past to revisit his relationship with Arjun or the Pandavas, finally realizes after a long time that he was never a rebel to Arjun not because he was of less worth but because Arjun had a different role to play in the coming days. Ashwathama also justifies that it was easy to dislike Arjun because he did not have a visible wound like Karn, "A heroic being without a visible wound evokes resentment, not love" (101). The other way of looking at it is that a visible wound can make a less heroic person lovable which is an alternative way of revisiting life and stories. Ashwathama's life may be revisited in this alternative way. Thus, dialogues from new perspectives with the past begin to make sense of the present and build ways for the future. The epic may not have elaborated upon these minute complexities of the mind, but Patil's graphic novel has delved into those unexplored areas relevant to understanding the deprived child psychology of Ashwathama or any other child in contemporary society. It also helps the reader to see Ashwathama more as a human with characteristics, flaws, and complex psychology and redeems his villainous image in the epic to a certain extent.

Language of Image and Color combinations

Umberto Eco (1932-2016), in his essay "How Culture Conditions the Color We See"(1985), elaborates on how color becomes a means of communication and how we build 'personal relationships' with colors as a result of our cultural conditioning. He argues that "the puzzle we are faced with is neither psychological nor an aesthetic one: it is a cultural one, and as such it is filtered through a linguistic system" (159)

The current time of Ashwathama's narration to the pyre keepers is painted in black and dark gray shades, symbolically reflecting the arrival of Kali Yug, a time of colorlessness symbolizing pain, angst, and death. At the same time, the stories in flashback are represented with shades of yellow, green, blue, and violet colors, symbolically referring to actions and liveliness (See Image 3). Having continuously used red and blackish orange in the initial three panels, Patil symbolically refers to blood, violence, and death. Blood, which is associated with the birth and death of humans and also the destruction of the universe, carries the story of the bloody battle in the bloodstream of every individual. The bloodshed caused by the bloody battle for establishing the pure blood lineage on the throne between two groups of blood-related brothers is completed with the bloody wound of Ashwathama, which burns like an ember. The blood imagery is recurrent in the text as well as in the visual images. The bloody red universe also signifies the end of civilization as the impact of clashes between two Brahmastras /modern-day nuclear weapon equivalents that could have eroded the entire civilization, the way the war ended with the destruction of warriors. The color painted on the panel also refers to the spiritual death of Ashwathama, the physical and emotional violence inflicted upon him, and a symbolic death to be born

as a new person. Krishna says, "Wander all alone for three thousand years. Make sure you use your time well"(6).

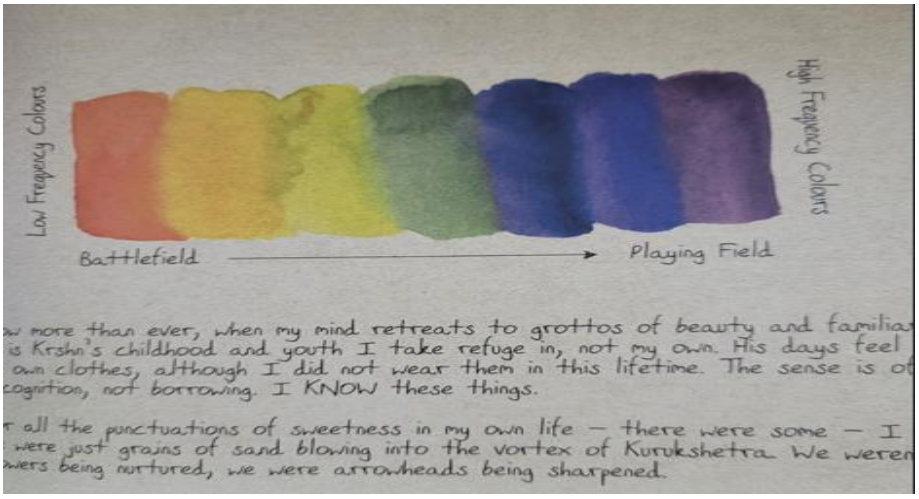

Image 3: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. 64

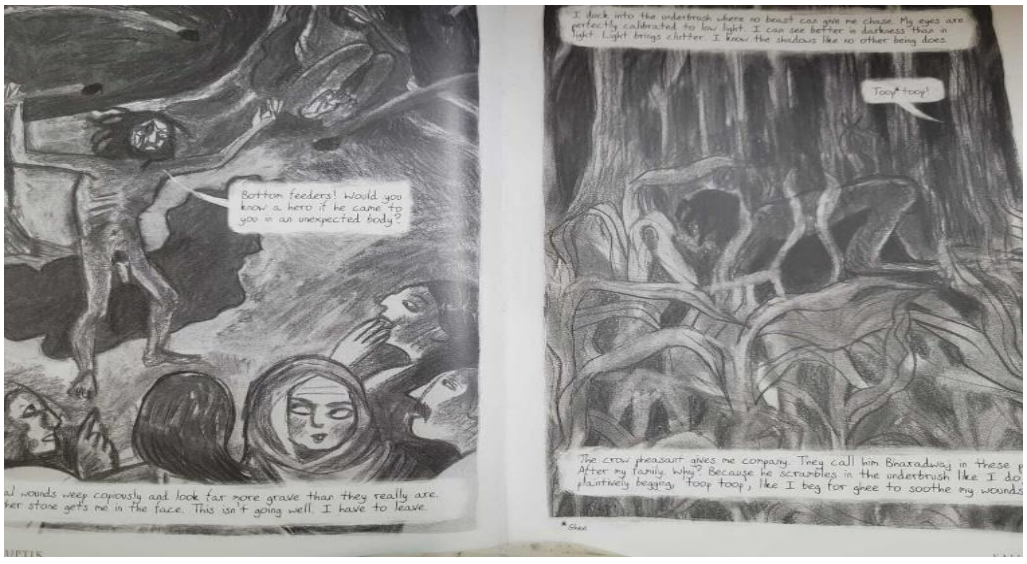

Image 4: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. 10-11

The visual image used for Ashwathama by Patil is a dark, skinny, grotesque skeleton figure hardly visible in the dim light of *samshan* ground and on the shadowy background of a burning pyre (See Image 4). The dark black and gray color is so reminiscent of the image of Ashwathama that his appearance is almost invisible in most of the panels in the novel; it reflects his gradual reduction from the epic tale, and he hardly remains visible literally and metaphorically, highlighting his tragic plight. In one of the initial panels depicting the battleground, Ashwathama is reduced to a ghostly shadow of a figure placed in the corner of the panel, while Krishna's image appears as the cosmic figure with large angry eyes reprimanding him (Image 6). The visual imagination of the poet changes to a large extent at the end of the novel in which the image of Krishna is placed at the center of the panel, and colorful shades are used to reflect divine benediction; Ashwathama's figure is slightly illuminated by the blue shade of Krishna's body, and Ashwathama instead of getting reduced in the corner is placed at the height of Krishna's feet. His eyes are fixed towards Krishna whose kind and loving eyes 'gazed' at him "As a cow gazes at her calf". This transformation and reconstruction of Ashwathama's visual image is significant to understanding the transformation of Ashwathama's soul, possibly the acceptance and hope for salvation he was long seeking. (Image 5 and 6).

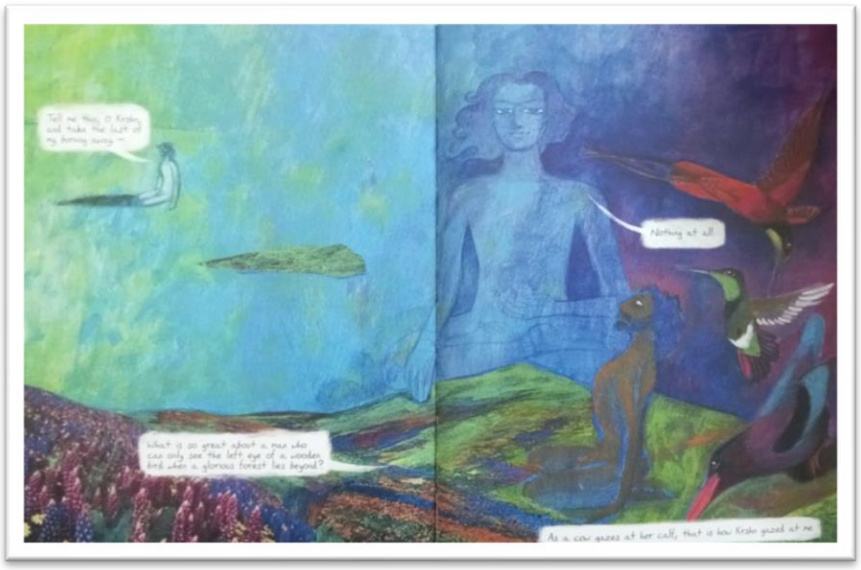

Image 5: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. 238-239

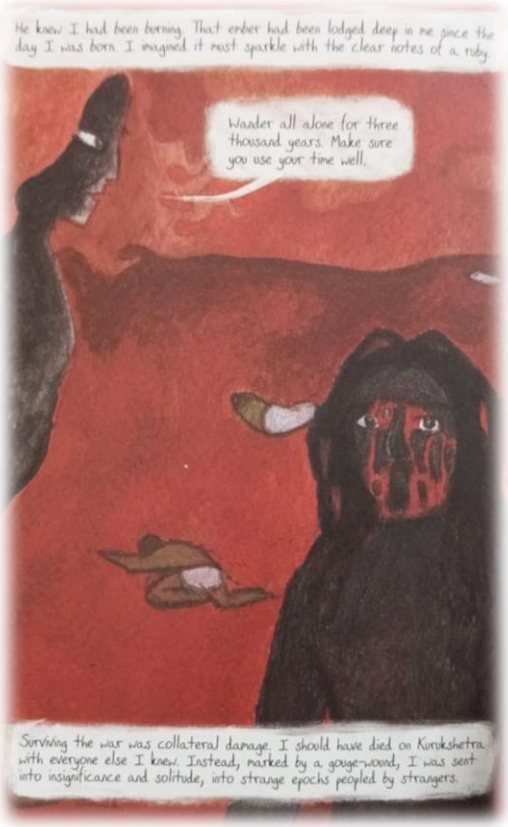

Image 6: Patil, Amruta, *Saptik*. P. 6

Vishnu's interest lies not in partisan politics but in maintaining the balance… The nucleus knows neither heroes nor villains. Similarly, Vishnu has no personal investment in the tussle between deva and asur, consonance and dissonance, antigen and pathogen, light and dark. There is no naive promise that light will eventually annihilate dark or consolance will eventually smoothen out dissonance. The only reason Vishnu intervened is to maintain balance (Adi Parva 94-95)

Ashwathama, singing the narrative of those unsung or unnoticed heroes, reflects his complaints against destiny vis a vis Krishna on one hand and refracts his own effort to give justifications on the other. Shivani Sharma and A. Rath write, "His narration of the tales reflects the deep human tendency of making every story a personalized narrative- bound by chains of causality and destiny"(11). Ashwathama's jealously ambitious dream to be equal to Arjun failed miserably due to the curse of limited knowledge and his strong sense of survival instinct. He felt pitted against the other heroes, and his efforts to be equal to his opponents remained unfulfilled. His limited knowledge caused his downfall while his extremely selfish survival desire made him a cursed immortal. His 'injured' heart looks back at the past, hoping for a different present and future. His words 'reflect' his tortured soul and 'refract' into those unfulfilled possibilities of past incidents that could have changed the present and future. Had Karn not renounced his golden armor and Eklavya not sacrificed his thumb, the result of the war could have been different. His nostalgia takes him to the furthest point: had he not cried for milk, had his mother not hurt his father's ego, had his father not come to Hastinapore for a job, had his father not befriended King Drupad or asked for a favor, had Drishtyadumna not trained by his father, his future would

have been different. Thus, it must be noted that there is a connection between causality and destiny. The fates of people may seem to be destined, but a legitimate causal action causes each destined result.

Patil's retelling of the Mahabharata in the graphic medium is never intended to be an exhaustive retelling of the epic tale; her intention is to recover the marginalized characters through her work. Patil writes,

> All too often, the Mahabharat is reduced to the sum total of two things – the fratricidal battle between the Kuru princes and the battlefield dialogue between the avatar, Krishna, and his protégé Arjun . . . The real scope of the Mahabharat, however, extends a good distance either side of these events (Adi Parva 260)

As a reader and listener of the oral epic tale, Patil has addressed the questions that a mundane reader or listener may raise while reading or listening to the tale, like why him or why not him. The *Sauptik* ends with a series of questions that Ashwathama asks Krishna regarding his partiality to Arjuna and indifference to others. His questions echo the mind of a contemporary reader/listener for the epic tale's treatment of Karn, Bhim, Duryodhan, or Eklavya, who were kinder, humbler, and braver than Arjun in many ways. Patil, through the lens of Ashwathama, an 'injured,' 'defeated,' 'cursed' character, focuses on two other unsung characters in the epic, Eklavya, and Karn, who were equally ambitious if not more, but their ambitious dreams were cut short or even thwarted by other powerful legitimate authorities. Like Karn gave away the golden armor to Indra, Arjun's father, to keep his undying commitment to charity and thus empower the enemies, while Eklavya, who was equal if not better in archery than Arjun, sacrificed his thumb as a *gurudakshina* to Drona so that Arjun becomes the best

archer on the earth. It also means that the audience's personal background and social and cultural experiences play an important role in how one perceives and interprets a story. The sutradhar's own personal experience also impacts the storytelling. That is why, despite his genuine appreciation for Arjun's hard work and dexterously acquired skill in archery, he remains blinded by his jealousy and self-pity, while he could feel pity for Karn despite his arrogance as he had the visible wound for others to see. Perspectives differ, and interpretations vary as a story gets narrated and retold. Ashwathama says, "I tell one story, but as many versions will be heard as there are people before me. I can never be sure what they will hear"(Sauptik, 24). Thus, the story does not belong to any one person; the story belongs to the storyteller, and the moment it is told, the story belongs to the listeners as they visualize it.

An epic retelling aims to focus on unheard voices, ambiguous situations, unfinalized endings, or a conflicting situation. Patil also aims to capture some of these voices in her creative retellings, and her effort is to specifically focus on them as 'alternative protagonists' who remain 'unnoticed warriors' in the epic tale. In the words of Patil as she writes in her blog the "Mahabharatan equivalent of "huh?" and "why me?" and "who is she?"... but they are asked nevertheless. Almost all questions get a story in response"(Patil, 'Umbilical: Questioning the Lord", March 8, 2009). Patil writes, "Every question you ask is the heart of a single ruby- perfectly valid and complete in itself, opening out into a perfectly formed story nested within. No matter how many stories I tell you tonight and every night after, the job will remain incomplete"(2012,101). This is the 'unfinalizability' and 'openendedness of meaning Bakhtin has possibly focused upon in every utterances.

In the retelling, the alternative protagonists have been highlighted to render them the due space and recognition, but it can also be noticed that the arch-rival Arjun is appreciated for his skill, dedication to learn, and determination to execute. Arjun has also been prepared as a weapon by Drona to avenge King Drupad and later on in the Kurukshetra war for killing the unruly Kshatriyas to regain balance on the earth, for the preservation of Bhoo devi, the benign forces in nature. Krishna is no longer seen as the biased hypocrite double standard powerful ally of the Pandavas; rather, he is seen as the beloved, desired by everyone yet possessed by none, whose only aim is to maintain balance in the universe without favoring one or exploiting the other. Ashwathama's redemption finally comes as he realizes that "what Krshn offered to one, he offered to all…we stubbornly refused to reach out. The Pandavas, on the other hand, chose to reach out…while the Kauravas were still dismissing him as an upstart. The rest of us ignored him until it was impossible to do so any longer"(162)

Arjun has always been seen as the arch-rival of Karn, who was appreciated for his generous nature and act of charity, but "the missing link in his personal mythology ate (him) away…" He agrees that Karn hated Arjun more that he hated Arjun and both Karn and Arjun were worthy rival to each other, however, "their names are still uttered in hyphenation: Karn-Arjun… They shared a resentment fueled magnetism. Arjun's biological father was as absent as Karn's. The absent father left no scar tissue on Arjun. Karn, on the other hand, was marked for life by doubts about his identity"(105). Karn had all the potential to be the best warrior, but his fractured sense of identity and his lifelong search for true lineage made him side with Duryodhan. The arch-rival became interconnected despite their differences and rivalry. On the other hand, he never got

recognition and the status of being a true rival to Arjun, and therefore, he cannot be interconnected with Arjun. His ambition remains unfulfilled.

The novel gives a lesson about the danger or the 'curse of incomplete knowledge.' Having no lesson on a particular thing may humble one in an emergent situation. But having limited knowledge on a particular thing can empower one without realizing the entire truth or repercussions. Limited knowledge can easily give a false sense of superiority and power which can bring destruction. Ashwathama, Karn, and Abhimanyu became the victims of half knowledge or the curse of limited knowledge. Ashwathama learned invoking the Pashupat weapon from the doting father/Guru, but acquiring the weapon was so thrilling that he ignored the 'antidote, the mantra to revoke the weapon.' As a result, he was punished. Had he been able to revoke the weapon like Arjun, he would not have been slapped with the punishment of a hundred thousand years of lonely wandering in the strange epochs among the strange people. He calls himself a 'fool' and gives out a moral message which is pertinent beyond age, time, and space: "There are fools in every generation who clamour for powers they aren't equipped to handle… Sometimes it suffices to hand a monkey the machete he is angling for. Sit back and watch him behead himself." (120)

Through *Sauptik*, the readers get to know about Ahwathama more closely, his lonely yet cacophonous journey as an angry young fallen hero and how he has been wrestling with his resentment, guilt concern and hope for salvation; a single action of his lifetime destroys an entire clan, rings the clamor call for the initiation of the Kaliyug, and he becomes the weapon in the hands of Shiva and Vishnu for the cycle of *sansar* to continue. The reader sees his life as a sacrifice on the altar of a new age

to maintain the balance of the world, the way Dadhichi was sacrificed, or King Kuru fed himself to the land, "surviving the war was collateral damage. I should have died on Kurukshetra with everyone else I knew. Instead marked by a gauge-wound, I was sent into insignificance and solitude, into stranger epochs peopled by strangers"(6), Ashwathama says.

Conclusion

The *Mahabharat* is not simply a religio-cultural epic text restricted to a literary domain. It goes beyond the domain of religion and culture and becomes a living text transmitted in popular domains like media, theatre, songs, social media, and paintings. Therefore, the process of meaning-making is not confined to academics, readers, or even religious persons, but it is broadened to every individual who comes across the references from the epic with individual socio-cultural-political-ideological baggage. The retellers of the epic are aware of this knowledgeability on the readers' parts; therefore, associating a fixed meaning or final conclusion or closure in their narrative is neither possible nor acceptable. Each of these retellings is intended to address these ambiguities, question the conventional understanding, unearth the differing perspectives and keep the conversation and engagement with the epic intact without destroying the essence of the epic narrative.

The novel and the play touch upon some thought-provoking aspects relevant across time and space. The revisits see Ashwathama with his potential for transformation. He may appear to have acted like a cold-blooded, nocturnal murderer, but he should not be rejected or dropped from the conversation because he was engaged in an unethical act. His action of killing the sleeping Pandavas and his attempt

to kill the foetus in order to eradicate the Pandava lineage must be abhorred; however, his motivation, built-up rivalry, blind ambition or vengeance must be studied at a time when news of such blind massacres of innocent lives by innocent brainwashed individuals have become rampant globally. The comparison may appear far-fetched, but Ashwathama's crime and punishment given to him by Krishna can both initiate the conversation about terrorism, revenge, and forgiveness in the contemporary world. Contemporary thinking about these issues related to crime, vengeance, and retribution is influenced by advanced human psychology because these emotions can intensify all other emotions in the background. It is also believed that "vindictiveness damages the core of the whole being" (V.3.20). Therefore, due punishment, which is a socially acceptable way of taking revenge, is necessary for bringing moral equilibrium in society and also to demonstrate to the perpetrators that certain crimes are unacceptable in society. For example, it is believed that for certain heinous crimes, the death penalty is the only adequate punishment.

In the current time, there are a lot of arguments and counterarguments in the social, political, and judicial spheres regarding whether capital punishment is justified and if any human agency formed in the name of the judicial system should have a right to give the death penalty. On the other hand, to fail to give adequate punishment to the criminal for the crime committed is also doing injustice to the victims. A criminal must be proportionally punished for the crime one commits. However, the question arises again who decides the proportionality? While counselling Yudhistira, Bhishma talks about the rod of punishment and proportionality. However, the wrestling on these issues seems to continue. Ashwarhama's crime, the punishment given to him, the

proportionality of the punishment, whether doing justice to the victims and finally, whether his punishment is justified- all these questions will continue to be asked again and again as societies evolve.

Another aspect that the texts touch upon is the importance of forgiveness which strengthens a human being when one forgives others or is being forgiven by others. Forgiveness is the opposite of revenge. Forgiveness is such a strong emotion that if it is inculcated, it can change the ways of the world. The act of forgiving is not easy, either. Yudhistir wanted to forgive the Kauravas which was severely criticized by Draupadi. Yudhistir said on different occasions, "To fight is easy, but to forgive is difficult" and "forgiveness is the strength of the virtuous." (van Buitenan III.276.2) Patil, in the novel, makes an evocative reference when she says that all the Pandavas, along with Draupadi, entered into the forest to pass the exile period, each of them entered into their own forest to nurture, suggesting the dark unexplored self inside; Draupadi entered into the forest of vengeance, whereas, Yudhistir entered into the forest of learning about dharma and virtuosity. When the war is over, and the maidservant washes the hair strands of Draupadi's thirteen-year-old unwashed hair with the blood of the enemies, there comes the reference to the blood of her dead sons and dead brothers and father. This is a vital reference to what vengeance and resentment can ultimately bring to us.

The horror of the war tempted Yudhistir to renounce the world and kingship and follow the path of non-violence, which ultimately sets the message of the epic that the epic is about peace and reconciliation in the broader sense. The texts also somewhat bring out the message of Ashwathama's soul-searching journey from anger, aggression,

and reconciliation to retribution. Ashwathama bore the emotion of anger and resentment for a long time and suffered every moment of his life, which we have witnessed in the play and, to a certain extent, in the graphic narrative. In the epic, Ashwathama is not seen asking for forgiveness from the Pandavas or Krishna. Having accepted the punishment, he continuously makes an effort to justify himself and his actions through the narration of his side of the story. Finally, his redemption comes as seen in the graphic text, when he accepts his guilt, forgives himself, and experiences unending turbulences in life through prolonged suffering, learns to see the broader implications of life instead of personal suffering, and thus goes through the process of soul transformation, broadening his vision and wisdom.

Ashwathama's story from the epic raises important ethical questions about the nature of and its implications in the war as it provides valuable insights into the consequences of the warfare in general on the sides of both the victims and the perpetrator, the use of forbidden weapon like nuclear weapon in the current context and the last but not the least, the responsibility of individuals and their sense of ethics in the times of conflict. The war in the epic started with few war ethics, which were broken by both sides as per convenience and situations. However, massacring the noncombatant or killing the sleeping people raises questions about the human rights of the civilians, and also further, it may be extended to the adherence to international humanitarian laws, which clearly differentiate between combatants and noncombatants. The use of the Pashupateya weapon, a nuclear weapon equivalent, should raise the issue of proportionality of the usage of destructive weapons against people because nuclear weapons of the current time do have the potential to destroy

an entire civilization. The Russia –Ukraine war which has been going on for more than a year has witnessed massacre of soldiers, innocent civilians and infrastructures; and a threat of nuclear weapon from the Russian side looms large over in the current situation.

Ashwathama's descent into darkness, his dark desires, hidden ambitions, and thirst for vengeance are psychological phenomena that are not singular to him; these deep psychological complexities need to be further discussed in modern times. The psychological trauma that he goes through, the injury of mind that he experienced in the battle which led to his extreme suffering may initiate the conversation regarding the psychological impact of war on soldiers today, and there should be comprehensive support system, mental health services and substantial efforts to prevent post-war trauma and prolonged side effects of war.

Finally, Ashwathama's story historically serves as a caution to remind us of the devastating effect of warfare and also the importance of diplomacy, meditation, and dialogue in achieving the possibility of reconciliation. Contemporary discourse on reconciliation emphasizes the importance of acknowledging past wrongs, fostering empathy, and creating dialogue spaces, promoting healing and social cohesion. In the epic, Ashwathama dialogues with himself without considering the diplomatic channels offered by his uncle, and when he is being punished, no conversation happens from his side. In the Mbh retelling by Bandyopadhyay, it is seen that he converses with himself and the absent personas, but the actual exchange of ideas and opinions does not occur, and therefore, the suffering continues. In Patil's novel, redemption and resolution seem possible towards the end as the eyes of Krishna and Ashwathama meet

even on a small scale. The eyes' meeting symbolizes gazing into the heart and seeing the heart's desire. The possibility of redemption and the fact that he says that he deserves a peaceful sleep now imply the success of reconciliation and forgiveness after a prolonged conflict. The Mbh retellings, thus, by engaging with the past in the present context and initiating conversation on various contemporary discourses, strive towards a more just and reconciled future for all while simultaneously making the epic a product of NOW.

CHAPTER 5

‘PRESENTIFICATION’ OF THE PAST IN POPULAR DIGITAL MEDIA

‘Presentification’ involves the process of bringing the past into the present in order to reactivate the past and reconstitute the present. Today's ‘Tele-epic age' combines technology and tradition, smoothens the interaction between past and present, popular and classic, tradition and modernity. Digital media facilitates 'polysemy' and provides a vast audience reach interactivity and multimedia capabilities that traditional storytelling forms often lack. Popular digital media platforms like TV channels and social media platforms, with their wide-reaching impact, emphasis on "real-time" and "its creation of a sense of an ongoing narrative "flow" (Williams 1974). Mahabharata adaptations in these mediums provide a visual and auditory experience that resonates with audiences, drawing attention to social, cultural, and gender-related matters. They have the potential to shape public perceptions and provoke meaningful discussions on topical and relatable contemporary concerns pertaining to the consent of women, mental health, ecological concerns, sustainable living, and anti-war sentiments. By presenting these issues in a compelling digital framework, these new adaptations can guide perceptions and inspire individuals to take action in "real-time" in the present on the global level. Interactive engagement from readers/viewers aids in co-creating the narrative and shaping the contours of digital storytelling. Such engagement also encourages discussions, interpretations, and the exchange of ideas, transforming the retelling experience into a collective endeavor.

‘Presentification’ of the Past

Paul Ricoeur, a prominent French philosopher, introduced the concept of "presentification" in his works on *Narrative and Time* (1985). Presentification, according to Ricoeur, refers to the process by which the past is made present through narrative and imagination. Through this process, the past gets activated in the present moment by means of creative expression, representation, and storytelling. In Ricoeur's understanding, 'presentification' happens when narratives capture the past experiences of human beings and make sense of the world, connecting past, present, and future. The process allows the past to be brought to the present and reconstructed through meaningful participation in the present. The meaningful representation of the past in the present shapes and influences the understanding of collective history, cultural values, and memory while facilitating a basis for shared meanings and identity formation. 'Presentification' does not call for mechanical reproduction or recollection of the past. Instead, it emphasizes a transformative engagement and dialogue with the past to build a meaningful present. It allows individuals and communities to reflect on their history critically, challenge dominant narratives, and explore alternative perspectives.

Digital Media, namely Television serials, animation films, documentaries, and different forms of social media like Twitter (Currently known as ‘X’), Facebook, Blogs, and Instagram, serve as modes of ‘presentification of the past’ by reflecting societal attitudes, religious beliefs, and cultural norms of the past and connecting it to the present context. Mahabharata retellings through these mediums offer a platform to reimagine the past, challenge perceptions, expose inequalities, and facilitate dialogue

with the past. Mahabharata adaptations in popular media shed light on how different topical and relatable contemporary issues concerning psychological complexities, war, and peace, politics of othering, ecological consciousness, sustainability, and have been perceived and dealt with within society. They provide a mirror through which viewers can examine prevailing belief systems, questioning their validity and impact on marginalized communities. By bringing these issues to the forefront, these retellings initiate conversations and compel individuals and communities to reevaluate their thoughts, perceptions, and biases. These adaptations possess the potential to be catalysts for transformation at the global level, challenging societal norms and fostering dialogue on pressing issues. By captivating a wide audience and igniting introspection, they appear as a medium capable of effecting positive change. Thus, Mahabharata retellings in digital media serve as vehicles for addressing contemporary issues and initiating thought-provoking critical discussions. Through their transformative potential, these adaptations challenge perceptions, question systems, inspire change, shape attitudes to look at our global existence, foster empathy for others, and contribute to human society's constant regeneration and evolution.

Mahabharata, the epic narrative in Digital media

Digital media offers unique and captivating avenues to convey profound stories. Regardless of the medium used, a well-crafted story has the power to capture the audience's imagination. However, when considering the expectations of transmedia audiences, there is a desire for a multimedia reading experience beyond traditional storytelling. To gain insights into these expectations, *Latitude*, an international research consultancy, conducted interviews with 158 early adopters as part of its

"Future of Storytelling" project in 2012 (http://www.futureofstorytellingproject.com/). The findings of this research highlight four key expectations, referred to as "The 4 I's ": Immersion, Interactivity, Integration, and Impact. Essentially, audience/viewers/readers seek an immersive experience that allows them to explore a story in greater depth, extending beyond a single medium's boundaries while expecting more interactivity and impact on real lives.

According to *Bhagavad Gita*, a deeper understanding of things is equivalent to action. Bakhtin also says in “Philosophy of Act” (1993) in a similar tone: "every thought of mine, along with its content, is an act or deed that I perform (3)." According to him, concrete 'action' minus thought nullifies the thought itself. Therefore, it can be said that thoughts and actions are indivisible and they are interdependent. While reading the epic narrative or experiencing it visually on digital media, the act of reading happens at multiple levels- in their own selves and with the text and its multiple semiotic experiences. By semiotic activity, what is meant is the experience of intertextuality in comparing the text or relating it with not just other texts but also life and everyday experiences of life as texts. When readers are placed at the intersection of several texts, the meaning-making process becomes vibrant (Bandlamudi, Dialogics 158) and 'heterogeneous' (Lotman). While experiencing the retellings, the readers penetrate this intersectionality of texts at multiple levels, and as a result, both the texts and the readers get enriched.

Throughout the chapter, it can be noticed that sometimes the epic narrative gets a better understanding of a contemporary problem and facilitates understanding and dealing with it in a better way, or occasionally, current social and political affairs and

conflicts help in understanding the text. As a reader and viewer, the researcher's movement within the epic narratives and the retellings activate the memory of other versions of the narrative to contemporary events and life experiences. These movements can go in different directions and intersections while creating meaningful experiences, activating the dialogic nature of the text and the reader.

One notable example of this is Twitter (currently known as ‘X'; however, for maintaining parity with the secondary critical materials, the word 'Twitter' will be used in the present work), a social networking and microblogging site that initially limited posts to 140 characters but later extended it to 280 characters. While originally intended for sharing news and communication of updated information, users have pushed the boundaries of Twitter and even started writing novels on the platform, making it a viable and accepted medium for literature, from personal anecdotes to ancient and modern classics. Established and amateur authors have ventured into storytelling on Twitter to tap into new audiences or promote their upcoming projects and publications.

Experimental Storytelling on Twitter and the Mahabharata on Twitter

Twitter has emerged as a platform with significant potential for experimenting with storytelling, catering to a generation that prefers reading on the go. It provides a unique space where "the world tells its stories all day, everyday." The concept of tweeting has become deeply ingrained in popular culture, sparking speculations about the possibility of the next great American novel emerging on Twitter. This growing popularity highlights the increasing appeal of storytelling on this dynamic and fast-paced platform. Twitter literature, while differing from traditional literature, falls

somewhere between "avant-garde digital literature" and "transitional electronic literature," which includes electronic texts resembling print books with some innovations (McCracken 105). Despite these distinctions, there are three main similarities between traditional fiction and Twitter fiction: a love for words, precision in their use, and an economy of language (William 21).

In the Aristotelian concept, reading a text is a structured and linear activity. However, Twitter narratives are fragmented, unconventional, and not driven by a traditional plot. Two types of Twitter fiction exist. The first is self-contained, known as "shorty" or "twister," where authors like Arjun Basu posted intriguing daily tales in a single tweet since 2008, engaging readers' imaginations on the go. The second form of narrative is serialized, unfolding stories through a series of tweets. This technique revisits and retells classic or modern stories, captivating followers over weeks or even years. Despite readers' familiarity with these stories, the Twitter format allows them to relive and recreate the experience of "NOW moments," intrinsic to the medium (Bronwen 100). Twitter fiction follows a media trend identified by Margolin (1999) where action and narration almost overlap, signaling a shift towards a desire to "Tell as you live" rather than "live now, tell later." Margolin refers to this form of narration as "concurrent narration," where the reader experiences a sequence of "NOW moments," which is a central aspect of this trend. (142–166.).

Like flash fiction and SMS fiction, Twitter fiction offers a distinctive form of storytelling celebrated for its interrogative space and adherence to what E. Aarseth terms "ergodic literature." In ergodic literature, readers play an active and non-trivial role in navigating the text, moving beyond the conventional passivity of reading. With

serialized Twitter fiction, readers engage in scrolling through threads, piecing together the narrative's development, and capturing the attention of other users. However, while Twitter provides a unique platform for storytelling, its scope for experimentation may be limited, as some narratives may not differ significantly if presented in a printed book. Chindu Sreedharan's "Epic Retold" exemplifies such serialized Twitter fiction that can be experienced in both digital and printed forms.

On a dynamic digital platform like Twitter, text remains highly volatile, constantly shaping and reshaping according to the demands and perceptions of readers. When engaging with a narrative, readers have the unique opportunity to enter into a dialogue with the storyline, offering their views on situations and contexts. Thus, they actively participate in the "process" of co-creating the narrative on social media, becoming both "cotellers" and "coproducers" of the storytelling experience (Thomas 131). Catherine Belsey highlights the relationship between readers and text, emphasizing that readers do not merely uncover a singular unity within the work. Instead, they encounter the multitude of possible meanings, the incompleteness, omissions, and contradictions that the text may present (89). This interpretive freedom allows readers on Twitter to engage with the narrative through "retweets" and "shares," making the story accessible to readers worldwide. In this process, the narrative is dislocated from its original context of the author and their tradition.

Roland Barthes's seminal work, "Death of the Author", has significantly shifted the focus toward readers in the meaning-making process. The meaning of a text is no longer centralized within the author's domain; instead, it is now located at the site of the readers during their process of reading. As readers engage with the text, they

actively participate in shaping its meaning, and their interpretations take precedence over the author's intentions. The author's authority diminishes, giving rise to the idea that texts are open to a multitude of interpretations based on the readers' individual experiences, perspectives, and cultural backgrounds. The readers' role becomes paramount in uncovering the various layers of meaning embedded within the text, marking a significant departure from traditional notions of authorial control over interpretation.

Epic Retold:

Chindu Sreedharan, a former journalist who now teaches journalism at Bournemouth University in England, may not have a background in Mahabharat Studies, but his profession has equipped him with an understanding of politico-economic phenomena and global developments that impact human lives. These include migration, transnational activities, terrorism, racial discrimination, gender rights, wars, environmental degradation, and economic fluctuations, among others. Through this venture of revisiting the epic narrative, Sreedharan appears to be making a statement and crafting his own ideology in response to these phenomena, expressing his individual response to these contemporary issues.

Inspired by Prem Panicker's retelling of the Mahabharata narrative from the perspective of Bhimsen on a blog, Chindu Sreedharan undertook an ambitious project to complete the story of Bhimsen on Twitter over a period of four years. He embraced the challenges of retelling the epic, painstakingly "reimagined incidents" and "recasted characters" to offer a fresh perspective to the well-known tale. He presented in the first-person narrative of Bhima, the protagonist. The story unfolds in the present tense,

creating an immediate and intimate connection with the readers. Bhima becomes a "pathos-filled protagonist," and his story is shared in real-time on Twitter, capturing the essence of his "NOW moments" as they seemingly "happen." Twitter as a platform expects “the immediacy" and "breathless urgency of style," which is also known as 'concurrent narration.' In this way, Sreedharan utilizes the micro-blogging platform to its fullest potential, allowing readers to experience the narrative in a way that feels alive and immersive. He realized that to garner followers and maintain their interest over the 1605-day journey, he needed to create a captivating voice that readers would want to follow and engage with. Hence, Bhima's first-person perspective became the vehicle for drawing readers into the narrative and making them feel invested in the protagonist's journey.

After successful experimentation on Twitter, the narrative was published as a printed book by Harper Collins in 2014. Divided into 40 episodes with distinct titles, the book retained some unique storytelling characteristics of Twitter, albeit losing the interactive aspect specific to the platform and the voices of the followers. Despite this, *Epic Retold* offers a glimpse of a reimagined Mahabharata, capturing the essence of the original tale while initiating discussions and debates around contemporary global issues. The story on Twitter is 'simpler,' a less complicated plot digestible by even a reader unfamiliar with the original epic" (Sreedharan, Author's Note 4). In the words of Sreedharan, "This was not reimagining the Mahabharata, but reimagining the Mahabharata for Twitter" (Author’s Note 5)

Sreedharan's ambitious project, *Epic Retold,* faced intriguing challenges as he sought to reimagine the grand narrative of Mahabharata for the fast-paced world of

Twitter. It has successfully captured the imagination of Indian and global users. In order to capture the attention of readers beyond regional or national boundaries, the author successfully kept away the deep philosophical discourse of the epic on dharma, moksha, and spirituality, customizing it to meet the preferences of those "hungry, impatient" modern readers who crave present-day stories amidst their limited spare time. An ambitious project like this naturally has its challenges. The first challenge was whether a platform like Twitter, known for its brevity, could accommodate a long and complex narrative like Mbh. The second challenge involved structuring the complex narrative with its multilayered digressions in fragmented tweets and determining if it could retain readers' interest over time.

Moreover, retelling a well-known story like Mbh had its own hurdles as the storyline is mostly familiar to the majority of Indians. So, readers familiar with the story might lose interest if they can't connect with the story at present and also if they do not find something of present-day relevance or authenticity tailored to look forward to. Therefore, to make the story ‘tellable’ on the digital platform of Twitter, Sreedharan adopted the style of diary writing with "concurrent narration," which is the style of telling the story in NOW moments, narrating while in action, “tell as you live” (Margolin). Thomas Bronwen calls it "presentification" (103), allowing the past to be reconstructed in the present for sustaining in the future. In Sreedharan’s words, “He (Bhim) will live his life on Twitter, telling this story, sharing his NOW moments as they ‘happen’” (Author’s Note 4). Sreedharan started sharing the story on his Twitter account @epicretold in 2009. Another dedicated Twitter account, @aboutepicretold, was maintained for interaction with readers, receiving inputs and inspiration from readers, and providing updates on his progress.

The various storytelling techniques employed by Sreedharan to sustain the audience's attention and keep them eagerly waiting for the next installment are ‘frequent interjections,' ‘cliff-hangers, flash-forwards, deviations designed to foreshadow, to create suspense” (Author’s Note 5). These techniques acted as hooks, compelling readers to come back for more and remain engaged throughout the four-year storytelling process. With its inherent constraints of brevity, the Twitter platform challenged Sreedharan to be creative in adapting the narrative to fit within each tweet's character limit. Despite these limitations, he skillfully conveyed the essence of Bhima's journey and presented the classic narratives to a contemporary audience from the perspective of this legendary character. Some of the important issues that Bhima's story surfaces are absolutely relevant to a new generation of Twitter fiction readers or users of Twitter social media.

Through the gradual unfolding of Bhima's life on Twitter, the narrative allows for a deeper exploration of his perceptions, complexities, and philosophies. The beauty of this storytelling lies in its universal appeal, as it transcends cultural and individual boundaries to connect with a wider global audience. The issues and themes explored in the narrative are not confined to a particular culture or tradition; instead, they touch upon concerns that affect human lives worldwide. This aspect of the narrative makes it more relatable and relevant to a diverse audience, regardless of their geographical location or cultural background. Twitter's unique format enables past stories, such as the Mahabharata, to be retold and reimagined in the present context, with a focus on the concerns and apprehensions of contemporary times. This ‘presentification’ of past narratives and blending them with present-day issues creates a fluidity between the

notions of past and present, tradition and modernity. The convergence of these elements in the storytelling represents a "shift in cultural logic," as Jerkins (2006) suggested. It reflects how the interplay of old and new technologies, like the ancient epic and modern social media, can lead to a dynamic and transformative cultural experience.

Confronting Hypermasculinity through Bhima

The characterization of Bhima carries key element of novelistic discourse. Unlike an epic character, which is characterized by allegorical values, heroic traits, conviction, self-assurance, etc., Sreedharan's Bhima is a "life-like and a real being, a persona in the making" (Garg and Kumar 181) with many vulnerabilities and weaknesses and self-doubt. He experiences feelings of loss, anxiety, complexity, competition, self-doubts, shame, and hopelessness at different moments. His experience is akin to the experience of a young man who suffers from mundane pains and pleasures. The feeling of limitations, loss, and effort for improvement or complete surrender at times make him a relatable human being, "who live(s) his life on Twitter, telling this story, sharing his NOW moments as they happen" (Author's Note 4)

The story on Twitter presents Bhimsen’s journey as a marginalized figure who is considered bullheaded, slow, and unintelligent by people around him, including the Kaurava brothers and even his own brother Yudhisthira. Bhima's immense physical strength and abilities are meant to be used for the advantage of others. The pranks, mockery, and constant complaints of elders made him believe that he lacked intelligence and needed to depend on others for decision-making, creating his share of

vulnerabilities and weaknesses. He is constantly ridiculed and castigated by those who wish to control him. This manipulation is seen as necessary to ensure that his power is channeled in a controlled manner. The concept of suspending reason in a person to exert control over them is rooted in the understanding of psychological manipulation and power dynamics. When reason is suspended, the individual becomes more susceptible to influence, manipulation, and control by others, making it easier for those in positions of authority or influence to shape their behavior, beliefs, and actions. As Bhima realizes the truth behind the ridicule he faced, he channelized his energy in the direction of improving his physical prowess: “In his (Kripacharya) eyes Yudhistir excels with chariots, Arjuna with bow and arrow. Me? I am only good to wrestle or fight with the mace” (Sreedharan 16). However, he finds solace as his mother, Kunti, confesses that he was the one Dritarashtra feared the most, which also reveals the hidden potential of his strength. Even the elder brother, Yudhisthira, does not shy away from manipulating and directing Bhima's actions according to his own ambitions. He abhors some of the actions of his elder brother and finds him hypocritical, biased, pretentious, and selfish, "That is the thing about my elder brother. So very conscious about who is inferior to him, who his peer, what is right, what wrong" (Sreedharan 15). On a number of occasions, he stops being an obedient younger brother and questions the decisions taken by Yudhistir.

Unlike the Bhim in the epic narrative, which was nonchalant about the manipulation of his physical strength while undermining intelligence, Bhima of Twitter does not conform to the chauvinistic formation of the society. He resists the attempts of rendering him insignificant and unintelligent so that others can easily manipulate him.

Despite possessing elephant-like physical strength, being a "hyper-masculine" protector-warrior, and capable of smothering the opponent, he maintained his humanitarian values, which reflect his innocence and simplicity. Sreedharan's Bhimsena emerges as a young man characterized by emotions, sympathy, feelings, and intelligence.

Society maintains the dichotomy between physical prowess and emotional intelligence. Vulnerabilities and emotional weaknesses in men have always been frowned upon in our society. The social framework fears physically strong men and retaining fear is important to stay relevant in contemporary society. Bhima's character in "Epic Retold" suffers from this dichotomous situation. He goes through the internal struggle of projecting himself as a flawless hypermasculine superhero or a relatable human being with complexities and weaknesses. In today's world, true manhood is associated with physical strength, emotional stoicism, and a lack of vulnerability. Men are often nurtured to suppress their emotions and show toughness outside, as any display of emotion is considered a feminine trait and a sign of weakness.

Bhim in *Epic Retold* constantly negotiates between these dichotomies. On one hand, his hypermasculinity is embodied by his extraordinary physical strength and as an unbeatable warrior. On the other hand, he embodies an emotional self, marked by empathy, sympathy, and simplicity, a more subordinated form of masculinity. The Twitter narrative focuses on this constant negotiation and struggle between the two 'selves' of Bhim. As a thoughtful person, he takes refuge most of the time in his internal monologue rather than action, especially when dealing with his brother and mother. His guilt for leaving pregnant wife Hidimbi, a strong and self-reliant tribal woman, is evident and yet obeys the verdict given by the mother and brother, "Hidimbi will not

fit in." and "we cannot take her with us" (49). His guilt-stricken heart "drowns" him as he "battles for words- a battle I lose" (49). The source narrative does not dwell on those effeminate sensibilities. He accepts his position as a ‘monk warrior' who kills Hidimba and Baka, marries Hidimbi and fathers a child and moves on after giving the definition of ideal motherhood and how she should strive to be an ideal wife and mother.

Again, at the prospect of a marriage alliance with Draupadi and the five brothers sharing, Bhimsen momentarily frowns, criticizes the age-old practice of polyandry, and even asks if Draupadi's opinion is sought on such a strange alliance. He initially tries to keep him out of this alliance, "I turn away, feeling bitter. First Hidimbi, now Draupadi. Pawns in the Pandava game for power" (67). But very soon, he finds out that the "calculation proved right; the alliance brought a swift end to our impoverished lives" (69). Despite his efforts and verbal objections throughout the text, Bhima remains a 'pawn' in the power struggle: "I walk away silently. One more wrong, what does it matter now?” (67). To register his protest he leaves for the forest in search of Hidimbi and ultimately marries Balandhara, a princess of Kashi. This marriage, though Yudhistir comments as "an alliance good for Indraprastha" (74), was not for pragmatism but an emotional refuge to a lovelorn Bhima.

In "The Gambler" episode, as Draupadi's honor is humiliated, "the look on Draupadi's face burns my soul" (104). His wrath, coupled with the extreme pain of humiliation, falls on Yudhistir, "Every pimp who drink and gamble and live off their women. I say even they do not stake their women for another throw of dice!" (105) He respects Draupadi for her strength, intelligence, and sensibilities. He admits that Draupadi understands Yudhistir more than the brothers and his friendship with

Draupadi deepens. During their *agyatbaas* in the chapter 'Vallabha' keechaka's sexual advancement towards Draupadi made him remember, "The same dice, The same Yudhistira, The same Draupadi. But not the same Bhim. This time I will not stand idle,‘ Keechaka will die,' I promise Draupadi quietly. 'Tomorrow.'" (160). There are some similarities between Shreedharan's Bhima and the Bhima of the epic in their expression of anger, the proclamation of angry vows, thirst for vengeance against those who defile Draupadi's honor, and his bond with Draupadi. However, they do not mirror each other. Sreedharan's Bhima is a complex youth who resists blind obedience to his elders or those who are in authority. His friendship with Draupadi is equally true, yet he considers Hidimbi to be his wife. His simplicity and thoughtful nature push him to decide his idea of righteousness and unrighteousness. His simplicity must not be mistaken as stupidity; rather, he becomes "an emblem of introvert, claustrophobic, thoughtful youths of the "Twitter generation" who seek refuge in the world of social networking sites and whose meditative speculations are more confident than their actions" (Roy 33-34). Many young people in the modern context may resonate with this crisis and constant negotiation in Bhima's character, for whom social media platforms like Twitter have become an integral part of their daily lives.

Ambiguity regarding his parentage also kept him uncomfortable, which resulted in his lifelong search for his true identity. He is called *Vayuputra* by many, but his confusion is aggravated when he learns that Karna, who is killed by Arjun in the war, is his elder brother. The questions "Who are we really? Who is my father?" are ultimately answered by his mother, Kunti.

> Karna was born before Hastinapore. When I lives with the sage…. Pandu wanted a son who would be great king. Who would be intelligent, know the Vedas and be wellversed in statecraft. I accepted Vidura for that purpose…. Pandu wanted a strong son. Someone to protect the kingdom. Someone powerful like Vaayu… There was someone. A giant, blessed with the strength of a thousand elephants"…When realization dawns on me, I stagger back. Is mother telling me the blind man who I could not bear to see, the one responsible for everything, is my real father? (276)

It is interesting to note that all these characters are not rendered any divinity associated with them. Perhaps Sreedharan was influenced by Bhyrappa's Parva, which describes the Pandavas as the progenies of "the leaders and chiefs of the lands of Devas" (Bhyrappa, Parva 150). This process was called '*niyoga'* and it was "customary then to acquire a son begotten by another man on one's wife, if one happened not to have an heir" (Karve 189). The epic narrative legitimizes *niyoga* as most of the primary characters in the epic are born out of *niyoga,* a detached liaison between a man and a woman. Sreedharan's extrapolation regarding Pandava parentage raises an important issue pertaining to legitimization of illegitimate child in modern society. The Pandava brothers, Dhritrastra and Pandu were born out of *niyoga* and they got the legitimacy because of social sanction whereas Karn lacked it. Therefore, the question of legitimacy or illegitimacy can be discussed in a society where adoption, sperm-donations, and other reproductive technologies are constantly increasing. It can also invoke the conversation that pregnancy can be possible without marriage or sexual intercourse which is a very modern concept. Such connections between past and

present, tradition and modernity constantly intersect, meet, negotiate, engage, and make dialogic reading possible.

Sreedharan's text dwells into the complexities associated with masculinity, power dynamics, and societal expectations, portraying Bhima as grappling with the intersectionality of his identity. Modern society witnesses such individuals who challenge traditional gender roles and constantly struggle to assert their agency and curve their individuality in a gendered, power-driven society. In recent times, mental health and emotional expression for men have become essential to focus on for a healthy and authentic male identity. Toxic masculinity is replaced by emotional openness, empathy, and vulnerability. Instead of judging a man or his masculinity on brute physical strength, the conversation regarding mental health is encouraged by providing emotional support, sharing feelings, and, most importantly, breaking free from the constraints of traditional gender roles. Breaking these stereotypes can facilitate building a society that allows men to lead fulfilling and emotionally healthy lives.

Regarding Imperial Expansion and Deforestation:

In Sreedharan's "Epic Retold," the burning of Khadavaprastha and taking the land away from its indigenous inhabitants can be compared to imperial expansion and a critique of deforestation. The burning of Khandavaprastha forest happened with all its inhabitants by Arjun and Krishna in order to build Indraprastha, the new palace and city of the Pandavas. In the process of forest burning, families of different species were wiped out. Mayan, an architect by profession living in and of the forest, could save his life as he agreed to provide his service to the Panadava brothers, like building a great

hall for Yudhistir or making weapons for Arjun. Sreedharan writes in the chapter "The Other Hidimbi" as Bhima raises concerns about the fate of the tribes living in Khadavaprastha: "what about the tribes who lived there? The Nagas and the rest?" Sahadeva responds "Some agreed to move here and work for us. The others ran away when we began setting fire to the forest!" (80). The response from Sahadeva highlights the disregard for the rights and well-being of indigenous communities, as they are forced to leave their lands or face the consequences of the burning forest. Iravati Carve considers this act of burning an entire forest along with its inhabitants to be one of the earliest "holocausts" in the history of civilization (57).

In Sreedharan's narrative of the epic, we see the indigenous tribal communities, including the characters like Hidimba, Baka, and Jata, have faced forced displacement and loss of their ancestral lands/forests and eventually are eliminated by Bhim, which can be considered as an act of imperial expansion in the modern context. The Pandavas were exiled to the forest for twelve years, and they settled in the forest, claiming the territories of the tribal for their own survival, often pushing off the indigenous peoples from their traditional lands, leading to the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and cultural practices tied to the land. Hidimba was killed as he found the presence of outsiders in his land; in order to claim his territory and authority over his land, he attacked Bhima and, in that process, got killed. The execution of Baka may not follow the similar note as Bhima killed him to save an entire village from his exploitation. These instances may not be compared with imperial expansionism. However, these instances can carry the debate around hierarchy, civilizational superiority, and the exploitation of others in the hands of powerful people. These issues of the past can lead ways to the future.

In India, Recent examples of forest land expansion and its impact on indigenous communities can be seen in various development projects, such as the construction of dams, highways, and mining activities. One prominent case is the construction of the Sardar Sarovar Dam in Gujarat, which has led to the displacement of thousands of Adivasi families from their forest lands along the Narmada River. Very recently, in Mumbai, the Mumbai Development Authority decided to chop off a large forest area for the expansion of the metro route. Similarly, the Adivasi communities in Jharkhand and Chhattisgarh are on the verge of complete displacement due to the acquisition of vast forest areas.

Overall, Sreedharan's reference to the burning of Khadavaprastha and the indifference of the Pandava brothers toward its Indigenous inhabitants can initiate a conversation regarding ongoing environmental and social issues related to deforestation and territorial expansion in the present-day world. Such injustices were not given much attention in the epic, but the author successfully draws the attention of the readers to such a lackadaisical approach to the environment and injustice to the indigenous inhabitants. Bhima thinks, "Yudhistir's notion of justice makes no sense to me. One rule for kings, another for tribal. I am speechless" (153). The forester and the tribals get equal importance in the Twitter narrative. The physical strength and emotional intelligence of foresters like Ghatotkacha and Kimeeran are almost equal to the princes. Mayan, another forester is an expert in weaponry and architecture.

Anti-war sentiment

Chindu Sreedharan, an anti-war journalist considers the *Mahabharat* as an "anti-war story," reflecting upon the futility and devastating consequences of war. In the narrative, he depicts war as an ugly affair full of treachery, devoid of any glory. For Sreedharan, the battle of Kurukshetra is a symbolic 'akhara' or 'gymnasium' or an arena in which Bhima and others like him are mere 'pawns' and forced to perform. As the war begins, Bhima soon realizes the hypocrisy of the ideological war between "righteousness" and "unrighteousness." And they all are merely puppets to be played and sacrificed at the altar of the war. Sreedharan strongly criticizes the concept of war and the glorification of warriorhood. The battle of Kurukshetra becomes a tragic playground where the children of warriors enter the battlefield to experience valor and glory and ultimately sacrifice their lives to fulfill their idea of heroism. Bhima, who has always been seen as an emblem of "hyper-masculinity," observes that for the older generation, war may be seen as a "duty," but for young warriors like Abhimanyu, it becomes a mere "game."

The narrative further de-romanticizes the image of Krishna, portraying him not as a divine figure but as a composed and shrewd politician who manipulates and plans war strategies for the Pandavas. Krishna's decision to send Ghatotkacha to the front indirectly forces Karna to use his special weapon against him, weakening his defense against Arjuna. In one particularly powerful anti-war statement, Krishna justifies Ghatotkacha's death by saying that it calls for celebration, not mourning. He questions Yudhistira, asking if he would rather risk his brother's life than that of the forest-dwelling Ghatotkacha. This highlights the callousness and disregard for human lives

in the pursuit of victory, "…Ghatotkacha's death calls for celebration, not mourning! Why do you think I asked Ghatotkacha to face Karna? His ultimate weapon is gone! Would you rather risk your brother than the forester?" (Sreedharan 238).

The outcome of the Great War turns out to be entirely futile, as Ashwathama's actions result in the tragic loss of lives, including Dhristadhyumna and all other Pandava soldiers. Bhima, who was once revered as a fearsome warrior, is left devastated by the devastating impact of the war, questioning the purpose of their victory. The character Drishtadyumna's remark, "War is ugly. There never has been one without treachery. There never will be," (233) reflects the harsh reality of war, and this sentiment holds true not only for the ancient Kurukshetra War but also for modern conflicts and territorial expansions across the world. Drishtadyumna, tells Bhima that "the righteous war exists only in Yudhistira's mind." In reality, no war can be called 'just' or 'righteous.'

Bhima, as the focalizer of the story, emerges as a voice against the glorification of war. His poignant statement, "When balladeers sing of war, they sing of glory. They do not sing of its stench," highlights the disparity between the romanticized portrayals of war and the grim reality of its consequences. Sreedharan's portrayal of Bhima's emotional turmoil after victory, where he laments the indiscriminate destruction of human lives and nature, further reinforces the anti-war sentiment. Bhima's realization that the victory has come at a crushing cost reveals the true tragedy of war and its toll on both sides involved in the conflict.

The anti-war theme in *Epic Retold* resonates strongly with readers, evoking a positive response. Sreedharan's approach to deromanticizing war and depicting its harsh realities strikes a chord with the audience. His engagement with readers during a Facebook panel discussion indicates the significance of these anti-war sentiments in motivating him to continue writing the story. The author himself acknowledges that, during a Facebook panel discussion on November 22, 2019, "In fact, I would not have finished it, but for that interaction."

The futility of war, indiscriminate destruction of human lives on both sides and destruction of nature are also reflected when Bhima laments: "Is this what we fought for? I sink onto the sand under the crushing weight of our victory" (268). The text serves as a poignant critique of war, exposing the harsh realities of armed conflicts and the destructive consequences they bring. The narrative urges readers to reflect on the senselessness and tragedy of war, making a powerful anti-war statement that resonates with contemporary audiences. The battle of Kurukshetra and its hapless desolation is not a singular incident of the past, the destruction of war continues in new forms and shapes. The concept of victory and defeat becomes meaningless in the face of a war and at the end of a war. War brings nothing but destruction, desolation, and disappointment; the loss of lives and resources in a war brings hopelessness, scarcity, and disappointment not only to the warring groups /continents or empires but to the entire world, especially in the era of globalization where the entire world is dependent on each other for various resources for the survival of the warring nations as well as those who are not directly involved. However, the suffering causes havoc to the lives of the common people. Recently, the Russia-Ukrainian War (2014-present) and the Israel-Palestine conflict are two ongoing conflicts in the world that have caused the

world to divide into two powers. Both the wars have resulted in significant loss of life, destruction of infrastructure, and displacement of people.

The epic sends out the message of peaceful dialogue and treaties to prevent war and mitigate the destruction of innocents, as we see the several peace talk missions sent from both the Pandava and Kaurava sides before the battle of Kurukshetra began. And also, there are rules and norms of war laid down before the battle commences. The new generation of people who have directly or indirectly experienced or felt the brunt of different invasions or wars in the world is very much aware of the UN's peace resolutions, efforts, and its limitations or manipulations by powerful countries like the US, China, and Russia. Throughout the narrative, Sreedharan underscores the message that war leads to immense suffering, loss of human lives, and environmental destruction. He presents the epic as an "anti-war story." This also leads the readers to the realization of the futility of conflict and war and the urgent need to seek alternatives to violence and war in addressing conflicts and disputes. The act of reading the text, followed by stepping out of the text and connecting it to other spaces, the readers can take contemporary perspectives on the text, and in turn, these areas of the text become the key to activating the dialogic nature of the text. Through this constant connection and movement between past and present, the text continues to be modernized while highlighting that warfare has not changed be it a traditional or in the modern society.

Despite its vast acceptance globally questions are raised on its artistry and literary profundity and also pertaining to its long-term impact on society and culture. The reading experience on Twitter is not like a "game that ends when the meaning has been found" (Iser) in a text, but it is a process of continuous exploration undertaken by

readers and not marked by any predictable confirmation. The story of Epic Retold is familiar to millions and yet its telling is marked by unpredictability. Readers are intrinsic elements in the exploration of such texts. The fragmented nature of modern texts causes the readers to be dynamically searching for connection, and in turn, the text also becomes alive, a living thing so that it can pace with the modified expectations of the readers (Iser 1972). The narrative and the author are followed by the readers, and simultaneously, the story follows readers as it helps them explore their own selves and life experiences. The interrogative space offered by Twitter as a platform is celebrated as the boundary between performer and performance, author and reader, fiction and reality, past and present, tradition and modernity, live story-telling and retelling crumbles.

In the heart of Bakhtin's dialogic principle is 'unfinalizability' in the meaning-making process. A Twitter narrative like this creates "an aesthetic of Unfinished" (Lunenfeld), which is far away from the concept of the static or stagnant conception of art and its finished interpretation. A continuous dynamic engagement with the work is as essential as its end results without letting the readers/users be passive consumers of a product and take active participation in an ongoing experience. Thus, a Twitter narrative, like a traditional literary piece, impacts society and world affairs by allowing space for dialogues and also by creating a sense of awareness toward the real and crippling issues of the world beyond physical or cultural boundaries. A new evolving branch like Twitter narrative may have a "clunky way of delivering fiction" (Crown) but its improvisatory and continuously evolving unpredictability keeps the space for tale, teller, and the user/viewer dialogic and dynamic.

Dharmakshetra, a Retelling on TV and Digital media

A surge in popularity can be witnessed as *Mahabharat*, the ancient Indian epic, is adapted on new media platforms like Television and OTT platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Disney+ Hotstar. These OTTs have transformed the entertainment industry as they provide a new and diverse range of content, including adaptations of classic literary works like the Mbh, accessible at any time and from anywhere. The accessibility, easy availability, and convenience of these TV channels and OTT platforms have played a vital role in popularizing the epic narrative among a vast range of audiences and also initiating thought-provoking conversations on contemporary issues and topics.

TV as a visual medium is more successful in creating an impact in the viewer's minds and conveying the epic's universal messages across generations. The adapted narrative gets a contemporary spin as modern storytelling techniques, historical settings, costumes, and body language appeal to our visual senses and thus bridge the gap between the ancient and modern while attracting existing fans and new viewers. Visual adaptations provide dynamic visual representations of the stories and, in that process, emotionally and intellectually engage with audiences. A global platform like this facilitates the global reach of the content. Through digital technologies, the narrative revitalizes for modern audiences by igniting discussions and debates on contemporary issues. Discussion around nuances and complexities of the protagonists and antagonists and their motivations for action makes the narrative more relatable and immersive, making the audience aware of shades of grey in real-life situations and the dilemmas involving decision-making. A continuous engagement with the characters

ignites further discussions on ethical and philosophical dimensions of contemporary issues as they go through their struggles, dilemmas, and triumphs.

Reading the Television Series as Text

Ulmer (1989), in his Introduction to *Teletheory*, says that in the age of electronics and technological tools, the process of understanding or cognition is shifting in people, and they are speaking and writing differently within the framework set by electronic technology (2). The epic narrative in TV media facilitates 'polysemy' or the coexistence of multiple possible meanings. Fiske (1987), a TV theorist, observes that in order to appeal to and to be popular with a variety of audiences, TV texts or a series in electronic media creates multiple threads or loopholes or lose openings so that these threads can trigger the thought process of the readers and initiate discussions. The viewers, on the one hand, get triggered by the text; on the other hand, the text gets 'prenotified' and intensifies discussion and dialogue. The context or dialogue can activate a recent or past memory and relate to a current affair of the society. Fiske says that "reading a television text is a process of negotiations between the existing subject position and the one proposed by the text itself". This constant negotiation, peaceful or contesting, can bring out the multiple layers of meaning in a text as the readers experience differences and similarities in their understanding of the real world and the text.

The iconic television series Mahabharat, produced by B.R. Chopra and aired on Doordarshan in 1988, brought this revered epic to the masses, marking a significant turning point in the media revolution. Right after the successful production of another epic, Ramayan, this production also received huge viewership. During the period of

the COVID-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022, it was aired again in Doordarshan and different other channels like DD Bharat, Star Bharat, and Colors, and according to report, it immediately rekindled the attention of old and existing viewers while also capturing the imagination of the young viewers. The adaptation of MT Vasudevan Nair's novel, 'Randaamoozham,' a drama series on Star Plus, and the thought-provoking radio show on Radio Mirchi called "Vicharon Ki Mahabharata," where radio jockeys-initiated discussions on the characters and their behaviors are some notable digital productions. In 2013, Star Plus Mahabharat started airing, and in the same year, an animated version of the Mahabharat was released by Pen Studios. Another unique adaptation that garnered less attention was Epic Channel's 'Dharmakshetra' in 2014 due to its less publicity and humble budget constraints. It was a series of 26 episodes in which prominent characters from the *Mahabharata* appear and justify their actions in Chitragupta's court. Peter Brook, a renowned theatre director and Grammy award winner, adapted Jean-Claude Carriere's play 'The Mahabharata' into a nine-hour production, transcending spatial and cultural boundaries. The play was further condensed into a six-hour mini-series for television and eventually edited down to approximately three hours for theatrical and DVD distribution. It is available on YouTube for the consumption of viewers.

Dharamkshetra is an intriguing adaptation of the Mahabharata, an ancient Indian epic, which offers a fresh and unique interpretation of the timeless narrative. The title word itself means a battle of dharma; in this case, the battle is not physical but metaphysical and metaphorical. The central characters of the epic undergo the metaphysical battle of revisiting their past and evaluating their actions in terms of

dharma and adharma in the court of Chitragupta. This television series in Hindi, initially aired on the Epic channel from 2014-2015 and later on released on several Over-The-Top (OTT) platforms like Prime video, Airtel Extreme, etc., presents a contemporary retelling of the Mahabharat narrative, combining elements of mythology, drama, and fantasy. In the introduction of the series, the message it delivers in a linear and nondramatic way is itself quite meaningful:

> The Great war is over. Kurukshetra lies barren, sans its great warriors and king, sans justice. The vicious battle saw the end of the unforgettable heroes and villains of the Mahabharat. The thin line between 'just' and 'unjust,' fair and unfair, deceit and loyalty, betrayal and duty, has never been questioned. The answers to these unasked questions lie buried in the ruins of history. Dharmkshetra resurfaces these buried questions and allows the legendary characters of this tale an opportunity to tell their side of the story for the very first time. In a postapocalyptic trial held in Maharaja Chitragupta's court, the seeming villain Kauravas' are allowed to accuse the so-called heroes 'Pandavas' and vice versa, in an attempt to justify their actions. (EPIC ON digital Home page)

The narrative stands out for its distinct storytelling technique, a fresh exploration of the story, and minimal decor akin to Judgement Day. The unique retelling does not retell the epic story in a linear style but provides occasional glimpses of the story to refresh the memory of the viewers as and when necessary. The characters from both sides revisit their own actions and perceptions of others and question the other in a very court-like disciplinary format and setting. The questions

that could not be asked in the epic narrative against the background of the war get a voice in this fresh season. Some of these questions revolve in the minds of modern readers too. This collection of 26 episodes is categorized as follows: Draupadi, Shakuni, Kunti, Gandhari, Ashwathama, Dhritrastra, Dushasan in 1 part each, while Karn, Duryodhan, Dronacharya, Bheeshma, Yudhistir, Bhim and Arjun in 2 parts for each respectively; Dhrishtadyumna, Yudhisthir, Nakul & Sahdev, Vidura, Vyasa, and Krishna are in one part each. This narrative structure offers a multilayered and multifaced exploration of the epic's events and characters, providing a list of contemporary questions to dialogue, debate, and discuss relevant timelessly.

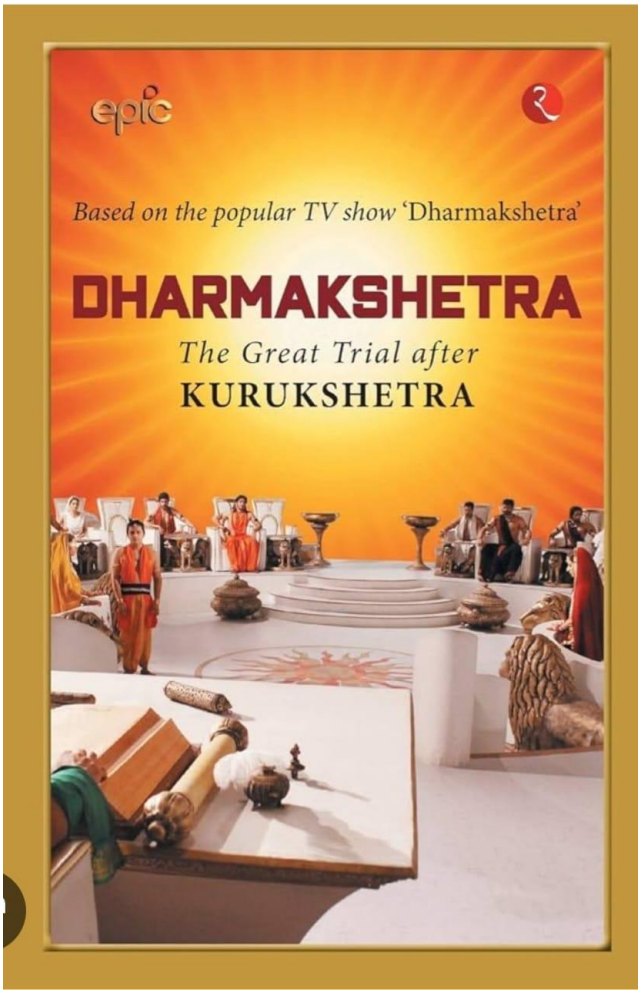

Image 1: Dharamkshetra, Cover page

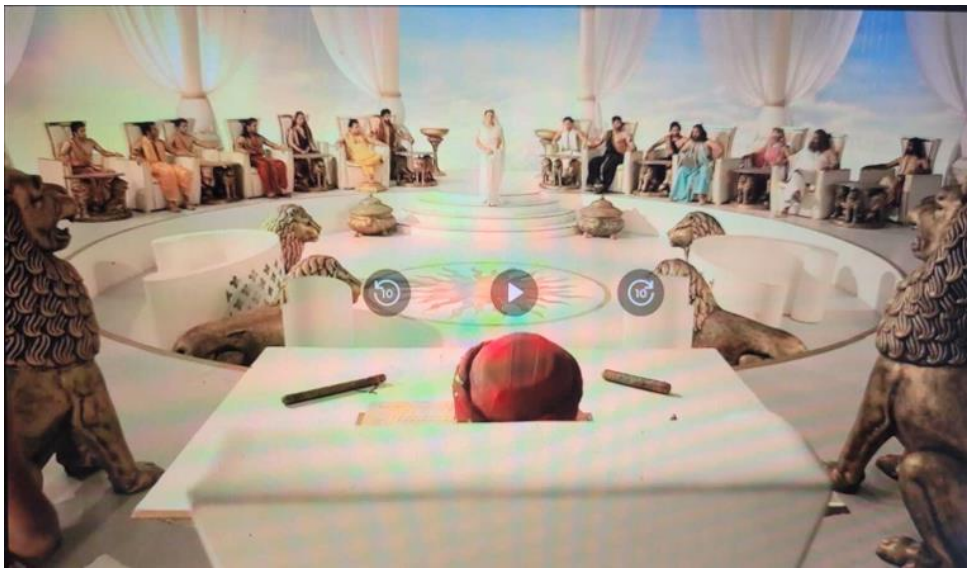

Image 2: Dharamkshetra TV Production

The series takes inspiration from the Mahabharata's iconic Kurukshetra war, where two factions of the Kuru dynasty, the Pandavas and the Kauravas, engage in a fierce physical battle. However, *Dharamkshetra* diverges from conventional adaptations by framing the narrative as a courtroom drama, engaged in verbal battle in the afterlife. All the central characters from the Mahabharat find themselves in a purgatory-like realm, where they face judgment for their actions during the war. The actions for which they have been questioned not only by their fellow characters but also the actions and questions that have triggered the minds of the readers for generations resurfaced, and the characters are given a chance to justify their actions on the basis of their individual socio-psychological and political reality. As a reader of the epic narrative, I find that some of these questions reflect the hypocrisy of the characters, duality, ambiguity, and even contradictory messages of the epic. Therefore, while watching the series a number of times, the researcher experiences intellectual satisfaction with the questions asked; however, the same may not always be the case with the responses given to those

questions. However, the focal point of the discussion is not the answers or justifications given by a person but the debate and discussion those responses initiate and how they directly or indirectly cater to contemporary issues.

One of the standout aspects of *Dharamkshetra* is its minimal visual captivating production design. The series utilizes a simple courtroom setting with not so much intricate designed costumes and fewer visual appeals to create an afterworld setting that is neither fantastic like a hypothetical heaven nor rustic or coarse like an earthly existence but a simple courtroom setting that will judge the actions of different characters and the verdict will decide one's next destination to heaven or hell. Although there was no elevated pedestal for any characters, however, Keshava was greeted with a gesture of respect by others, and he responded to others' folded hands pranam by raising his hand and saying *tathastu*, which is a gesture of blessing. All the major characters are allowed to fight their own case, justify their actions, or question the other person without any preconceived parameters pertaining to hierarchies, power struggles, and gender-based discrimination of the characters. Although there is no difference in the arena where they all are sitting, the two sides and the characters sitting on both sides clearly reflect the Kauravas and the Pandavas as they participated in the epic battle. Duryodhana's black outfit throughout the episodes may also be considered a stereotype, and Shakuni's entry with tension-filled background music is somewhat stereotyping the characters in the negative fold.

As a viewer, objections may be raised as enough time and space were not given to Eklavya, and his blind devotion and an extreme sense of gratitude for the Guru swept the issue of discrimination under the rug. Hidimbi and Ghatotkach were given

space, but their sense of responsibility and gratitude surpassed the critical question of the Pandava brothers' exploitation of the tribals. Despite the characters on the same pedestal, Keshava is given the status of a superior persona among others, and his words are hardly questioned or contradicted, or even challenged. He was not called to face charges; however, he expressed his desire to address certain important questions regarding his role in the battle, and explanations were given. However, the questions associated with Keshava and the answers received are more kind of lessons or advice given to contemporary viewers on the issues pertaining to the importance of action, taking responsibility for one's action, righteousness, and the importance of peace. The end of the series will definitely question the binary understanding of good or bad, virtue and viciousness in characters as almost all the important characters get their place in heaven except Dussasan, Shakuni, and Ashwathama. The series will also keep a question ringing in the audience's mind if there is a real winner in the war of Kurukshetra and what real-life lessons can be taken away from the whole saga.

In terms of storytelling, *Dharamkshetra* employs a non-linear narrative structure that intersperses flashbacks, character backstories, and moral dilemmas. This approach allows for a multi-perspective exploration of the characters' motivations, inner conflicts, and moral complexities. The series emphasizes the psychological depth of the characters, humanizing them and highlighting the moral ambiguities they face. This character-centric approach adds layers of complexity to the narrative, challenging viewers to question the notions of heroism and villainy and encouraging a more nuanced understanding of the Mahabharata's characters.

Furthermore, *Dharamkshetra* delves into philosophical and existential questions, engaging with larger concerns. Through questions and answers between the characters, the series reflects on the nature of dharma (duty/righteousness) in its collective and individualized aspects and how they can often be counterintuitive. Action according to the norms of dharma and its subjective interpretation prompts viewers to reflect on the consequences of actions on the individual or on the collective society. By addressing many such profound themes, *Dharamkshetra* taps into possibilities of deeper engagement with the Mahabharat and encourages further dialogic potentialities in contemporary times.

In this section, the two-part episode on Yudhistir (episodes 16-17) will be discussed as the questions and responses highlight the major sustainable goal of the universe. Most of the epic retellings portray Yudhistir as preachy, *gyany* yet hypocrite and gambler who does not evoke interest in the minds of viewers. The philosophy of *dharma* and *ahimsa* are embodied in the character of Yudhistir, the king and husband who gambled his brothers and wife in the game of dice. The deep philosophical discussion on *dharma, karma, and ahimsa* might be overwhelming for a viewer who consumes an OTT product to escape some real difficulty in life. However, in the present series, Yudhistir's response pertaining to *ksama* (forgiveness), *ahimsa* (non-cruelty) and *daya* (kindness) ignites discussion on sustainability and balance. Interestingly, he becomes a physical example with whom questions around *dharma* and *karma* get associated. The second aspect of this section will touch upon is consent of women which is again a very contemporary issue that deserves space for discussion.

And what could be a better possibility than Draupadi raising the issue against her own husband, King Yudhistir, the Dharmaraj?

Individuated dharma, Sustainable living, *Anarmasya*

Individuation of dharma, or ethical duty in Indian epics, is a complex concept that takes into account the various social groups and their specific roles within society. Dharma in Indian philosophy is neither a universal set of rules nor a one-size-fits-all concept but rather a dynamic principle that adapts to the roles and responsibilities of different social groups while catering to the context of each individual's position, relationships, and responsibilities. The individuation of dharma remains a guiding principle in contemporary understanding, reminding individuals of their unique responsibilities within the broader societal framework. Just as in the epic narrative, the characters' dharma has always been contextualized based on their societal roles and recognizing one's unique duties and responsibilities within their specific broader roles and contexts. Moreover, the concept of individuated dharma encourages individuals to be mindful of the impact of their actions on society. It prompts us to consider not only our own well-being but also the well-being of others who may be affected by our choices. This resonates with contemporary ideas of social responsibility and global interconnectedness. This section will highlight how an individual’s ethical action towards others can make one a responsible human being with sensibilities towards others.

In the epic, Yudhistir is the person who has lived a life following dharma. Despite losing a rigged game of dice, he followed his words and lived a banished life in the jungle for thirteen years. Despite Draupadi's repeated appeals to break his

promise and fight the evil Kauravas, Yudhistir reminds Draupadi of the promise he made in the *sabha*. He must follow his dharma. He goes on to say, "the ultimate disaster for which I dwelled in the forest and suffered is upon us in spite of all our striving … for how can war be waged with who we must not kill? How can we win if we must kill our gurus and elders (V.151.20-22)? He also says forgiving is more difficult, and seeking the path of peace is the best course of action as Draupadi gets impatient at her husband's stubborn pacifism and raises the universal question of unmerited and undeserved suffering of good people. Yudhistir explains, "I do not act for the sake of the fruits of dharma. I act because I must, whether it bears fruits or not" (Buitenen III.32.2-4). What it implies is that whatever the consequence is, he must abide by his promise and recover his stolen kingdom through honest means. Despite living a life of forbearance, patience, and dharma, the first charge against him labeled by King Dhritrastra was that he could not forgive his enemies, the Kauravas, and therefore, he does not know the true meaning of true *kshama* or forgiveness. The question pertaining to forgiveness in the context may be limited to the rivalry between the two groups of brothers. But it opens up a far deeper and denser discourse on what *Kshama* is. Who can forgive, and who deserves forgiveness? Does the forgiving emotion take the emotion of himsa or cruelty away? How practical it is to practice it irrespective of differences? If Kshama is a param dharma, why could Dharmraj Yudhistir not forgive the Kauravas and give away the kingdom to Duryodhan without waging war? The concept of individuated dharma comes as a rescue in this context.

In response to the charge, Yudhistir responds that it was his dharma as a son, a husband, an elder brother, and a king to fight for the battle to restore the respect of his

mother, wife, and brothers. It is his dharma to save himself and survive against the evil doers. As mentioned above, one's duty is to be mindful of the impact of one's actions on society, considering the well-being of others who may be affected by our choices. He tells Sanjay, the peace messenger, "… in times of trouble, one's duty alters. When one's livelihood is disrupted and one is totally poverty-stricken, one should wish for other means to carry out one's prescribed duties … which means that in dire situations one may perform normally improper acts. (Buitenen V.28.3.20). After spending 13 years of harsh exile, Yudhistir recognizes the limits of absolute goodness to be shown to evil people. The pragmatic Yudhistir tells Sanjay, "I am just as capable of peace as I am of war… as I am of gentleness and severity (V.31.22). The second charge labeled against him was by his mother, Kunti, who accused him of cruelty to the mother and not forgiving her for hiding Karn's birth secret. He laments the loss of having an elder brother, and also, the war could have been stopped if the secret was out. His individuated dharma is based on self-interest and prudence without being super-moral. The new prudent and pragmatic Yudhistir is the one who understands the true meaning of forgiveness (Kshama), compassion (daya), and non-cruelty (Ānṛśaṃsya).

A lot of research and studies have been executed on the epic and its messages on sustainability with respect to practicing nonviolence on other species, mindful consumption of animals, a holistic living with the planet. It has been repeatedly emphasized that people must care for other beings. While nonviolence or ahimsa has been celebrated throughout the epic, it does not supersede the importance of performing one’s action following dharma. In the series, the actions of Yudhistir have been evaluated, questioned, analyzed, and challenged openly, and he was accused of

being a gambler, manipulating dharma and his *dharm*a status as per convenience, acting selfishly on the occasion of *swargarohan*, and so on.

Despite war at the central position in the narrative, the text refrains from glorifying warfare or violence (*himsa*). Rather, it consistently underscores the futility of violence, as seen through the character of Yudhistir. Yudhistir's inclination towards non-violence (*ahimsa*) is evident as he hesitates to engage in mass destruction to reclaim his kingdom. As the son of *Dharma*, he experiences the oscillation between participating in the violence of the war to revive the lost authority or following the path of nonviolence. Yudhistir's dissent against war echoes a broader message against violence. However, being of the warrior class, he, along with the Pandavas, abides by Kshatriya dharma and engages in the war as a means to restore righteousness through violence. The justification of war resonates as the path of duty and virtue rather than mere self-interest. Thus, war, with its propelling violence itself, becomes an act of just war and justified violence for reestablishing action, righteousness, and replacing the negative force.

The concept of "just war" in the 21st century remains a complex and evolving ethical framework that seeks to reconcile the use of military force with principles of justice, morality, and international law. Just war theory has ancient roots but has been adapted to modern times to address the changing nature of conflicts, global politics, and ethical considerations. When applying this concept to the context of the Kurukshetra war in the Mahabharata, we can analyze the dialogic potentiality of the concept in the modern understanding for a just war. Some of these criteria for a "just war" can be typically analyzed in the context of the war in the epic. The war must have

a legitimate reason, usually involving self-defense or the protection of innocent lives. Preemptive strikes or wars for economic gain are often not considered just causes.

The Kurukshetra war was initiated to restore the rightful rule of the Pandavas and to establish dharma (righteousness) against the oppressive Kauravas. This aligns with the just cause criterion as it aims to protect the innocent and uphold justice. Military force should only be used after all peaceful options have been exhausted. Diplomacy, negotiation, and sanctions should be prioritized. In the epic, efforts were made to negotiate and avoid the war through diplomacy, but they became unsuccessful, and therefore, the war became the last resort as all peaceful options were exhausted. The use of force should be proportional to the threat posed. Excessive force or tactics that disproportionately harm civilians are not considered just. Also, war should only be initiated by legitimate government authorities, not by individual groups or non-state actors. The Kurukshetra war's purpose was to establish dharma righteousness and end the Kaurava tyranny. However, the war resulted in massive destruction and loss of life on both sides, raising questions about the proportionality of the response. The Pandavas, as the legitimate rulers, had the authority to wage war to regain their kingdom.

No war can be called just or righteous. One reasonable expectation of just war in the 21st century is that the war will achieve its right objectives and not lead to greater harm. It must restore justice and ensure the protection of innocent lives. Economic gain, personal vendettas, or flexing of ego or power must not be the agenda of a war. Civilians and noncombatants should be protected, and deliberate attack on civilians or civilian infrastructure is not considered appropriate. Moreover, military forces must follow the ethical rules of war, including respecting the rights of prisoners of war and

avoiding unnecessary suffering. The Pandavas had Krishna as their ally, and it is expected that their fight is for restoring justice and dharma. However, the war is complex, ultimately breaking rules and resorting to treachery and deception, resulting in unforeseen devastating consequences.

It's important to note that just war can be interpreted differently based on cultural and historical contexts, and the Kurukshetra war, like many historical conflicts, can be a subject of ethical debate with differing perspectives on its justifiability. The war in the Mahabharata has elements that align with the criteria of a just war, such as a just cause and attempts at negotiation. However, some aspects raise concerns about proportionality, the conduct of the war, and the actual outcome compared to the intended objectives. Just or not the epic narrative is often remembered as a story of war between two families of cousin brothers and the important thing is that the central characters perform their individual dharma according to their social obligation, they never doubted it, and ultimately, as it can be seen that they all go to heaven, the place of eternal bliss. The war may be at the center stage, and the characters revolve around it, but it is their individual action that they ultimately are evaluated for and not for the side they chose to fight for, the winning side of the Pandavas or the losing side of Duryodhan.

Despite the apparent celebration of nonviolence, the question readers and viewers always have in their minds pertaining to the feasibility of practicing nonviolence in practical life. The epic narrative goes beyond human-centric violence and delves into the inevitability of violence in the interactions between humans, nature, and other species. This is evident in a conversation between the sage Kaushiki and a

righteous meat seller in the *Aranyakaparvan* in the epic: "The whole creation… is full of animals, sustaining itself with fruits derived from living organisms…fish preys upon fish, and that various species of animals prey upon other species … while walking about hither and thither, kill numberless creatures lurking in the ground by trampling on them, and even men of wisdom and enlightenment destroy animal life in various ways, even while sleeping or reposing themselves (Ganguly, vol 2, 431-32)". He also talks in favor of negotiated violence, "The commandment that people should not do harm to any creature, was ordained of old by men, who were ignorant of the true facts of the case… there is not a man on the face of the earth, who is free from the sin of doing injury to animal life" (Ganguly, vol 2, 432).

The Mahabharat's treatment of nature and its organisms is multifaceted. It justifies practices like eating animal flesh and animal sacrifice in Yajna as meritorious. Even instances where the Pandavas burn down the Khandava forest and hunt animals for sport or sustenance during their exile aren't explicitly condemned as *himsa*. Instead, the text captures a constant tension between violence, which is carried out for survival, and duty vis a vis violence driven by selfish motives, exploitation, and cruelty. This tension remains relevant in contemporary times. The righteous Fowler's assertion in the epic is about adhering to one's rightful occupation and following the path of action aligned with one's dharma. Similarly, the sage Kaushiki's dilemma in telling the truth or following his dharma underscores the nuances of ahimsa as the *parama* dharma. This notion implies that the fear of committing violence should not lead to renunciation of action. Rather, if actions are undertaken in line with one's duty and without the intent of causing harm, they can be considered just and righteous. This nuanced

perspective reflects the Mahabharata's timeless exploration of the intricate relationship between action, violence, and duty. It is in this context that the root of a sustainable universe lies not in ahimsa but in *anarmasya* and *anukrosha*, the other two parama dharmas in the epic.

Individuated dharma provides the ethical foundation for both sustainable living and *anarmasya*. It prompts individuals to consider their unique ethical obligations and roles, which naturally lead to actions that align with non-violence and sustainability. It encourages individuals to be mindful of their choices and actions. This mindfulness supports sustainable living by promoting conscious decisions that positively impact society, the environment, and the planet at large. Sustainable living refers to the interdependence of all living beings; it aims to ensure that all species and organisms on the planet are not mere resources to be exploited by human beings; rather, they should be treated responsibly and preserved for the future.

A*nṛśaṃsya'* implies an absence of cruelty, viciousness, and unselfishness in one's conduct in treating others. The term is also associated with "good will, a fellow feeling, a deep sense of the other" (Lath 115). The 'other' in a*nṛśaṃsya* dharma encompasses all human, non-human beings and natural organisms who inhabit the body of the earth. While the philosophy of ahimsa predominantly resides within religious boundaries, its secular application remains limited. Conversely, the concept of Ānṛśaṃsya, or non-cruelty, takes a more inclusive approach by advocating kindness and non-cruelty in both thought and action, irrespective of religious affiliations. This *pravrittimarga*, or the path of action principle, extends its reach to all, regardless of their religious or non-religious stance. It provides a path to liberation through righteous

deeds catering to life's demands. *Ānṛśaṃsya* holds the power to bring in positive transformations on a global scale, shaping the way our world operates. By addressing the complexities associated with the notions of *himsa*, just *himsa*, and *ahimsa*, the Mbh gradually shifts towards a more secular outlook, centered around the principle of Ānṛśaṃsya. Unlike *ahimsa*, which may be shackled within religious dogma, Ānṛśaṃsya can serve as a unifying force that goes beyond barriers and inspires compassion and non-cruelty. This broader perspective, without any religious baggage, can be embraced by diverse communities and individuals, resulting in positive changes and harmonious coexistence. The exploration and dissemination of these concepts thus pave the way for a more inclusive and secular society, reinforcing the importance of non-cruelty as a guiding principle for humanity.

Yudhistir, the champion of *anṛśaṃsya*, practices it in his actions. For example, Yudhistir's request to revive Nakula's life, underscoring his responsibility towards his deceased mother, Madri, is an example of *anṛśaṃsya* - a selfless and compassionate act. This instance shows that Yudhistir can forego the selfish opportunity to save his heroic brothers like Bhima and Arjuna, who could have helped and ensured his victory on the battlefield against the Kauravas. It also showcases Yudhistir's empathy, thoughtful consideration, and genuine affection for both mothers. He rises above personal gains and pays homage to the memory of the departed mother. His actions again resonate with the principles of *anṛśaṃsya*, revealing his selflessness, deep sense of duty, and respect for others' well-being. This shows how *anṛśaṃsya* transcends selfish individual interests, emphasizing more upon compassionate and considerate actions.

After the victory in the Kurukshetra conflict, Yudhistir again followed anṛśaṃsya dharma by displaying an unwavering commitment to treating both friends and enemies with compassion, empathy, and benevolence. He arranged effective resettlement measures for the old, widows, and children who suffered due to the violent impact of the war. Moreover, Yudhistir shows profound respect and considerate treatment to the blind King Dhritrastra and Gandhari, ignoring the fact that their actions were responsible for the upheavals and loss of his friends and relatives.

Instances of practicing *anṛśaṃsya* dharma extend beyond human interactions and encompass interspecies relationships as well. This is evident both in relationships involving human beings and those excluding them. A compelling instance is found in the *Swargarohanikaparva*, where Yudhistir's act of declining entry into the celestial realm, thereby choosing to remain with a dog that had been his constant companion throughout his journey, underscores his profound empathy and heightened sensitivity towards all creatures, even those beyond his own kind (Ganguly, Book 18, XVII). Yudhistir's compassion is evenly extended to the deceased mother and the dog, with his heart resonating with their anguish (*anukrosha*, signifying shared sorrow). His willingness to forsake paradise in favor of a mere street dog showcases his unwavering commitment to righteousness and his inherently selfless disposition and care for others.

The foundation of leading a morally upright life lies in caring for others. Typically, our caring is directed towards beings or matters that hold significance to us, while those who are indifferent to often receive little to no attention. Vrinda Dalmiya (2014) emphasizes that care is intricately linked to understanding, operating on at least two levels: comprehending the entity being cared for and comprehending the origins of our concern

for it (116). This understanding involves actively seeking knowledge about the subject of care, as well as acknowledging gaps in our own knowledge, thereby paving the way for personal growth and self-discipline through alternative viewpoints (Dalmiya, 2001, 2007, 2014). This introspective exploration of our connections shapes our identity (Dalmiya 118). Genuine care transcends mere emotions of empathy and sympathy; it necessitates subsequent action (refer to Nel Noddings' Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education, 1984, and Joan Tronto's Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care, 1993). Yudhistir was willing to sacrifice his goal for heaven or victory in the war for genuine care for others and is ultimately rewarded for his compassion and empathy with victory and heaven.

This approach to caring is reinforced by the inclusion of opposing voices, like Yaksha's and Indra's engagements with Yudhistir. The caregiver, Yudhistir, responds to dissenting perspectives through conversation and intellectual discourse, revealing that authentic caring also involves permitting alternative voices to scrutinize our caring actions. The essence of caring is found in allowing others to critique our care, thereby revealing the authentic nature of our concern. Both *Ānṛśaṃsya* and *Aunkrosha* create room for diverse engagements and viewpoints. Much like other concepts in the Mahabharata, these principles are not rigid absolutes; they remain open to reinterpretation, reevaluation, and critique. This is evident in the extensive debates, uncertainties, ethical dilemmas, and ongoing dialogues within the Mahabharat's discussions on dharma. Such dynamics are essential for establishing a sustainable world where every human action stems from a foundation of non-cruelty, consideration, and empathy for all beings.

The dharmas and right action associated with Yudhistir are discussed; Draupadi's allegation against Yudhistir forms the principle of Kama. He is accused of seeing the brother's wife with lustful intentions. The allegations are discussed and argued upon. Ultimately, Yudhistir, the flag-bearer of the dharma in his thoughts, actions, and intentions, not only accepted this allegation but also asked for forgiveness and due punishment from Draupadi. Even though he may have failed in following the principle of kama, he accepts his feeling of *kama* for Draupadi, knowing that she is married to Arjun. This conversation leads to an important topic of women's consent, which will be discussed in the next section. It is at this moment his mask of *Dharmraj*, the ultimate follower of *dharma*, falls off, and Draupadi silently gazes at him. She may have been secretly pleased to see that her husband is a human with flaws and vulnerabilities like any other person. This also proves the difficulty and complexity of living a principled life in a world where just and unjust, right or wrong, are so intricately blended together.

Ensuring Consent and Dismantling Coercion:

The second issue this section deals with is a very contemporary and pertinent question on the consent of women and women's liberty in decision-making for their lives. How do we define and understand consent in various contexts, including relationships, marriages, and sexual encounters, and what factors influence an individual's ability to give genuine consent? How do cultural norms, traditions, and societal expectations impact women's autonomy and consent in choosing their partners and making life decisions? How can attitudes toward gender roles, relationships, and consent be shifted on a societal level to create a culture that values women's autonomy?

What preventative measures can be implemented to address the root causes of coercion and promote a culture of consent? How can men be engaged as allies in the effort to protect women's autonomy and dismantle coercion? These questions are extremely relevant in today's time. The Answers to these questions may be theoretically available to us, but in a practical context, hardly things have changed. Through Draupadi's questions and strong defense of her rights, as a woman against all the men presents in the Hastinapore court during *the Vastraharan* episode, some of these issues regarding her rights, freedom, and respect have been discussed. Because the questions of Draupadi were never answered, the issue pertaining to women's rights and freedom remained ambiguous even now in the socio-political and cultural domain. Draupadi's character has been revisited at every age and decade, and she has been reconstructed and reimagined according to the demands of time. However, the feminist readings of Draupadi in the context of women's rights and freedom are explored time and again.

In the adapted series *Dharmakshetra*, Draupadi talks about women's consent in a different context when she accuses Yudhistir of being lustful towards her after Arjun won the competition in the *swayamvar*. She accuses him for being responsible for her marriage to five brothers and also not convincing Kunti enough to stop this act of polyandry. Draupadi accuses Yudhistir of never asking or taking her consent if she agrees to the marriage with five brothers. In episode 11, she says,

> A woman's consent is required. One cannot force to marry someone because the person desires her. Without consent if a person forces a woman, the person must be duly punished" (36.05 - 36.50).

The words of Draupadi echo the voices of women today and initiate a conversation about the consent of women in the 21st century.

Consent is a fundamental principle that underpins ethical and legal interactions in various aspects of human life, such as relationships, marriages, and sexual encounters. However, the concept of consent is complex and multifaceted, as it involves not only the explicit agreement to a certain action but also the underlying context, power dynamics, and individual agency. To comprehensively address the question of what constitutes consent, we must delve into its nuances and examine the factors influencing an individual's ability to give genuine consent. Consent within relationships goes beyond mere agreement; it involves mutual respect, communication, and the recognition of individual boundaries. Consent may be an ongoing process, subject to change based on evolving feelings and desires. Consent in sexual encounters necessitates clear, enthusiastic, and voluntary agreement. It should be free from any form of coercion, manipulation, or intimidation. Consent can be withdrawn at any point; lack of resistance does not imply consent.

Several Hindi movies have tackled the topic of the importance of women's consent in sexual encounter. These movies address issues related to consent, autonomy, and the significance of respecting women's choices. For example, the movie "Pink" is a courtroom drama that revolves around a sexual assault case and raises important questions about consent and women's autonomy. The film highlights the importance of understanding and respecting a woman's consent. Marital consent extends beyond the ceremonial acceptance of marriage. It involves emotional, psychological, and physical compatibility. Factors like cultural norms, familial expectations, and societal pressures can influence one's ability to

give genuine consent to marriage. The talk on marital rape in India has also gained momentum. In a healthy relationship, partners communicate openly about their desires and boundaries. Consent to activities, emotional support, and decision-making becomes a collaborative process based on mutual respect**.** "Parched" (2015) is another movie **set** in a rural Indian village that delves into the lives of four women and their struggles against patriarchy and misogyny. The film addresses themes of marital rape, consent, and the importance of women's agency.

Consent can be compromised when significant power imbalances exist, such as in hierarchical relationships or situations involving authority figures. Power dynamics can inhibit open communication and influence decisions. Coercion, whether through emotional manipulation, threats, or physical force, negates consent. Consent must be freely given without external pressures. Societal expectations and cultural norms can influence an individual's perception of consent.

Draupadi's story and struggles in the epic depict the crucial issues of consent, autonomy, and protection of women's rights, which remain pertinent in contemporary times. Her life is an apt example that showcases complex power dynamics, gender discrimination, and the violation of consent. The incidents like her marriage with five brothers without seeking her opinion, putting her at stake without her knowledge, forcefully bringing her in the open court against her will, and getting publicly humiliated and disrobed in the Kaurava court raise critical questions about the respect for women's autonomy, her consent and the urgency of dismantling coercion in the past as well as in today's modern society. Draupadi's marriage with five brothers and the *vastraharan* episode exemplifies the violation of consent. Despite her protests, she

faces humiliation in a situation where her respect and individuality are entirely coerced. Draupadi's coercive experience in the historical context highlights the gender inequalities that have persisted across centuries and persist even today. Her humiliation in the hands of others exposes the dark side of patriarchy, which ultimately demeans the rights and consent of women. The incidents in her life are not a singular or unique experience of any woman's life. Such coercion and violation of rights and honor happen frequently in our society across the globe. The incidents of rape, molestation, and assault are rampant in our society. Such incidents undermine women's autonomy and their right to make choices about their bodies, relationships, and lives. In the 26th episode, when at the behest of Keshav, Chitragupta asks the question to all the members present in the court to share what they have learned from their human life on the earth, Draupadi responds:

> Be aware of your rights and do not let anybody else control your life, otherwise such *Dyutkriyas*, violating women's honor will never stop. Only you have the right to decide for you and your life (my translation 41.40)

Draupadi's polyandric marriage to the five Pandava brothers is an example of her lack of autonomy and agency. Her birth as a fiery woman was to establish revenge against Drona. She becomes the pawn in the hands of her father, King Drupada, who arranges her *swayamvara* (a ceremony where a woman chooses her husband) with the condition that only a skilled archer can win her hand. Her choice gets limited to serve the purpose of revenge. The narrative in Sarla Mahabharata and Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni depicts Draupadi's unrequited hidden feelings for Karna. If he had to marry Arjuna, he had to reject Karna on the grounds of social hierarchy. It is believed that

Krishna advised her to choose Arjun. Again, her choice is staged and maneuvered to meet the demands of the political situation. While the Pandavas win Draupadi's hand in the *swayamvara*, the situation is complicated by their mother Kunti's instruction to share whatever they have amongst themselves. Draupadi's consent is not sought, and she becomes the wife of all five brothers due to her adherence to their mother's command. This situation is marked by power struggle and socio-political coercion, as family expectations and revenge-motive take precedence over Draupadi's personal wishes. The questions of parents' political and social choices take precedence.

In the epic, when Draupadi is forcefully brought to the court, she asks this question, " Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?" The question kept ringing in the assembly. The answer to that question is not yet given even today. In response to her question, Bhishma says that when a person has lost himself first, he has no right to stake anybody else. In this case, Yudhistir lost himself first, so he had no right to stake Draupadi later. However, he continues to say that in our society, a wife belongs to the husband, and a husband has every right over the right. So, even though Yudhistir is no longer free, the wife Draupadi belongs to him legally, and he can stake her. According to this logic, Draupadi, or any wife, is devoid of individuality or her unique separate existence. Her existence is blended with the husband as a possession. A husband's authority over his wife is unquestionable, and his honor is dependent on legitimately protecting the sexuality of his wife. By violating Draupadi's honor, Duryodhana violates the honor of her five heroic husbands. Bhishma could not give an answer to Draupadi's question because he could not step out of the dynamics of patriarchy. This

is a form of coercion that continues even today in our society. However, Draupadi's logical and moral argument brings her voice back to a certain extent.

In *Dharmkshetra*, too, she was accused of being the *khalnayika* and responsible for the war under the pretext of the violation of her honor in the *vastraharan* episode. She logically argues that she, as the princess, chose her husband in the *swyamvar*, and when Yudhistir lost himself at the dice game, he lost his right over her; her humiliation in the *sabha* as a legitimate property of the husband was unacceptable. Draupadi must be appreciated for her strong-willed, tough, eloquent, and resilient nature and for asserting her agency in difficult situations both in the epic and the retelling.

The theme of consent remains central in modern relationships. Draupadi's story ignites discussions about mutual respect, open communication, and the importance of consent in intimate relationships. The visual effect of the pain and anger in her eyes serves as a reminder of the social coercion and gender-based violence in contemporary society. The narrative reminds us to be mindful of this aspect of respecting the honor and space of women. The episode also reminds us that robust legal frameworks must be devised to protect women's rights and autonomy. Modern society must make policies and social and legal frameworks to ensure women can make choices for themselves without fear of coercion or violation. Draupadi's resilience and mental strength to stand up against her violators inspire modern women. She was not afraid to accuse her husband *Dharmraj* Yudhistir, the flagbearer and upholder of dharma, for desiring her brother's wife unlawfully, an immoral act. Despite not having material proof to substantiate her accusation, she continues to assert that a woman's sixth sense can feel how a man feels about her. Yudhistir, the Dharmraj, accepted the strong

accusation and also felt guilty of being jealous and lustful and requested due punishment. In the epic narrative, we have seen Draupadi dialoguing with Yudhistir on an equal pedestal without getting intimidated by his stature or respectable position in society; she calls him a coward for not following his Kshatriya dharma or the dharma of a husband or the eldest brother.

Draupadi's depiction defies any single voiced depiction. In *Dharmkshetra*, she is seen as an assertive, emotional, fiery-tempered woman yet humble to her mother-in-law when Kunti accuses her of being responsible for the carnage between brothers. Modern contemporary women are expected to be homely and humble yet capable of having a fiery voice on the exterior, balancing their professional and personal lives. She must be dutiful, wholesome, resilient, yet soft at home. She occasionally asserts herself and stands up for her interest in front of her husband and mother-in-law, yet remains humble and submissive, making her a contemporary woman. The media productions of such legendary characters capture the voice and ideology of a group of people with vested interests. Their perspective of nation, culture, and religion gets captured while ignoring the voices of the less powerful or people in the periphery (Romila Thapar). Considering this observation, it is undeniable that each of the epic narrative's renditions has always been unique. The media productions that claim to be multivoiced, also considered the mass media, are not totally independent and get subordinated or single-voiced by the ideology of the producers and the marketing and commercial obligation. As a result, their respective versions are projected as THE version, and the danger of homogenizing the narrative succeeds.

The notion of acquiring consent and respecting the wish of the partner, even in marriage, is a concept that is garnering attention now. One's personal desires cannot be the sole reason to violate the space of the other. Recently, examples like the #MeToo movement and the Hema Commission Report Malayalam caused a lot of stirs in our society. These movements underscore the importance of urgency of obtaining explicit and enthusiastic consent in intimate relationships and not exploiting women. The Film and Entertainment industry has also experienced this movement. On TV shows and films, such narratives celebrating women's autonomy and women challenging societal norms and asserting their right to choose their partners find prominence and popularity. Even advertisements have gone beyond looking at women as sexual objects.

Countries have started to enact laws that criminalize forced marriages and coercive practices. Educational programs aimed at empowering women with knowledge about their rights and choices are gaining traction. An ancient text like the Mahabharat becomes modern, contemporary, and dialogic when the debate and discussion around the issues grow and appeal to the modern viewers of today irrespective of their knowledge or lack of it about the epic and this dialogic potential to debate around the significant issues are not necessarily limited to a particular geographical territory. The medium referred to is both social media and digital or TV media to make these narratives easily accessible, visible, and enjoyable to the young audience who may not necessarily be interested in reading these epic narratives and yet readers can understand the contemporaneity of the narrative; while watching the program on TV or reading it on their social media platform, the episodes, dialogues or incidents continuously make them conscious of the current affairs on the world today.

Thus, marriage is continuously happening between old and new, tradition and modernity, ancientness and contemporaneity.

Conclusion

A text or a narrative like Mbh is not confined by any particular fixed codes; rather, it has always represented and highlighted complex mobility, dynamic interpretations, and continuously evolving meaning-making process due to its inherent dialogic nature. The same narrative has always attracted different meanings as time and space and viewers/readers change. Mass media production may be hugely influential, popular, and accessible in rallying out their versions as the version of the masses. However, meanings cannot be monopolized, and the dialogues/episodes/narratives/utterances continue to trigger magically multiple and varied experiences and interpretations in the minds of the viewers. The viewers/users of digital media or social media, as it has been discussed, cannot be passive. While watching a particular narrative, their socio-cultural-political and strategic understanding of their real-life experiences in the world has a direct or indirect impact on how they cognize or understand or interpret the epic narrative.

By examining the retellings of the Mahabharat on Twitter and social media platforms, this chapter highlights how digital storytelling has evolved in the age of social media. The study demonstrates how the Mahabharata retellings have adapted to the digital story-telling method, shaped the story-telling technique, and, in turn, provoked pertinent discussions to shape the understanding of the social media addictive generation. While there are challenges and criticisms associated with digital

retellings, it is evident that they have played a crucial role in the preservation, popularization, and reimagining of the epic. As digital storytelling continues to evolve, it is important to consider ethical considerations, responsible storytelling practices, and the role of education in engaging with and understanding digital narratives.

Not a lot of serious scholarly work has been produced on the social and cultural implications of the digitalization of Indian epic narratives and how it has impacted its reception, interpretation, and understanding among people. The impact of digital platforms on readership, engagement of audience, and the negotiation of cultural meanings are areas to explore further. Also, further studies and discussions are required on the democratization of knowledge, the role of digital media in shaping popular narratives, and the challenges of preserving and interpreting the cultural heritage of the epics in the digital age. A postdoctoral researcher at Stanford University, has undertaken the ambitious task of constructing a comprehensive online, digital, audio-visual encyclopedia of the Mahabharata. This multimedia website aims to archive the epic's portrayal on television and the big screen and showcase its diverse performance traditions. Collectively, these diverse adaptations demonstrate the enduring popularity and relevance of the Mahabharata in the digital age. From television series to animation, radio shows, multimedia encyclopedias, and theatrical productions, the Mahabharata narrative continues to garner the attention of audiences and evolve as a timeless epic that resonates across various forms of media.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The research study intended to deliberate on how the act of reading/revisiting/viewing the retold narratives in different genres and media has established the dialogical aspects of the epic narrative and its retellings by opening up to far-reaching understandings of the texts. The retold narratives function as sites to talk about modern concepts like fluidity in gender, consent of women, complex psychological and inner conflicts, politics of war, and practicing sustainability in life, etc., in short, dealing with issues which are not limited to a particular community but extremely relevant to the world. The epic may not explicitly answer specific questions, but due to its remarkable semantic flexibility and diverse interpretations passed down culturally, historically, and individually through generations, it can create and reveal knowledge about all of them. Moreover, propagating an absolute single answer for a specific question is not what a multi-voiced epic like Mahabharat does. All these contemporary concerns mentioned above find their place “inside” the epic explicitly or implicitly, and yet they become fully understood and recognized as the narrative is penetrated from the "outside." Therefore, the knowledge or lesson the epic creates in the form of further dialogue and conversation is not automatically done; the readers from outside must intervene to connect the "outside" world with the "insides" of the epic. New ideas, meanings, and responses are born at the threshold where the outside and inside converge and negotiate. Bakhtin’s dialogic theory has provided the thesis the adequate framework to apply the playfulness, indeterminacy, and flexibility in re-reading the epic and the retellings to create

contradictory and contesting meanings and interpretation based on the reader's socio-cultural-political orientation and the time and space; one is situated in. The first two chapters of the thesis elaborately deal with these aspects.

The dialogic and constant intertextual engagement of the epic and its retellings has helped in redefining the epic; on the other hand, they provide further insights and concepts that can be worked upon by future readers/retellers. The flexible and adaptable nature of the epic allows modifications in its textual integrity, form, storyline, and style, and 'yet being alive now as ever before' in our psyche and necessary existence. (XVIII). Following Arindam Chakrabarti and Sivaji Bandyopadhyay, it can be said that Mbh celebrates and comprises both eternity and perishability, classical antiquity and contemporaneity, and it is because of that despite it being an ancient classical text, it can be read in the light of today's social condition. They have rightly said: "The Mahabharata is at once and a living text; a museum and a laboratory; and a sourcebook, complete by itself, and an open text, perennially under construction."(xix).

In the third chapter, an almost unknown character from the epic serves as a focal point for a crucial discourse on gender and its performative aspects. It challenges the notion that an individual's identity is fixed by gender, emphasizing that one's sense of self is an ongoing process shaped by engagement with various internal and external voices—a truly dialogic nature. For instance, the character Yuva from *The Pregnant King*, traditionally seen as the epitome of manhood and upholder of rigid gender norms. Despite societal and familial pressures, Yuva undergoes a profound shift, experiencing emotions typically associated with motherhood. Importantly, the novel

challenges the conventional binary understanding of gender based on biological birth, showcasing a multiplicity of gender ideologies. While the novels initially capture the traditional expectations and roles associated with characters based on their biological sex and societal gender norms, a nuanced exploration occurs within the mind space of the characters, using the stream-of-consciousness technique. In retellings, these characters find new life in the contemporary context, fostering a dialogue between the ancient narrative and current discourses on gender. The reteller's decision to present the story from a fresh perspective imbues it with new meanings, allowing for discussions on gender-related issues.

Chapter 4 highlights Ashwatthama's impeccable reasoning and logical justifications for his actions, emphasizing his decisions' deliberate and well-thought-out nature. His reasoning, presented as a set of logical arguments, stands in contrast to impulsive and illogical choices. Ashwatthama blends reason with emotion, invoking his role as a grieving son and duty-bound disciple, particularly in response to what he perceives as the unfair killing of his father, also his guru. The act of revenge and massacre is justified and moralized in a way that has become a kind of reality in today's world. The massacre of innocent students in school in Pakistan or the killing of innocent civilians in Kashmir or any other country is being justified with such moralization and legitimization of individual cause; such incidents that happened in the ancient time of Ashwathama or happening today reflect our moral depravity.

The central message of this section serves as a caution for future generations. It underscores the devastating potential of powerful weapons like the Brahmastra, an equivalence of nuclear weapons capable of wiping out entire existence. Through

Ashwatthama's example, accused of committing genocide without remorse, the passage warns against the dangers of unchecked revenge and the catastrophic consequences it may unleash. Recently, we have heard the news of countries like Russia and Israel speculating on the possibility of a nuclear attack on Ukraine and Gaza, respectively. When it comes to the responsible use of nuclear technology, a prediction found in the Mahābhārata, particularly in the character of Ashwathama, needs to be remembered. Ashwathama's reckless use of the 'brahmastra,' as depicted in the epic, serves as a stark reminder of the potential dangers when powerful technologies fall into irresponsible hands. This leads us to revisit the fundamental questions of 'responsibility' and 'ethics,' which represent the underlying messages of the epics. These aspects contribute substance to the epic narratives, transcending the mere scale of warfare and the larger-than-life heroic feats they portray.

The symbolic aspect of Ashwatthama's attack on Abhimanyu and Uttara's unborn child is presented as an illustration of attempting to extinguish future possibilities and hope. The crux of the advice for future generations is to be mindful of the far-reaching impact of one's actions, especially when driven by vengeance. It emphasizes the need for compassion, reason, and a conscientious approach to prevent the repetition of tragic pasts and safeguard the future fabric from the destructive potential that may lie ahead. His proud announcement, "Never mind what they say, it's my turn now" (p 49), echoes the voice of terrorism, the destruction of nature, and the end of cohesiveness in existence. However, his literal or metaphorical punishment regains the faith in righteousness. Also, the possibility of his integration into society is achieved through salvation and refuge in the eyes of god (Krishna), as shown in the

graphic novel, regains our confidence in goodness, virtue, and peace. The epic does not encourage readers or listeners to imitate the characters. Rather, they possess the power to stir excitement in the reader or listener, prompting a sense of identification (Can I aspire to be like this?). This, in turn, can foster deep engagement with the characters, ultimately leading to self-mastery through immersion in their stories.

Contemporary debates on crime and punishment, particularly regarding the appropriateness of the death penalty, echo the age-old discussions around justice. The chapter reflects the ongoing discourse on the justifiability of certain punishments and the challenges in determining proportionality. The caution to the new generation lies in the perpetual wrestling with these questions. While the novel's exploration of Ashwathama's crime and subsequent punishment provokes thought, it also serves as a reminder that these debates will persist as societies evolve. The chapter encourages the new generation to engage in these discussions with an awareness of the complexity and enduring nature of these ethical dilemmas.

The fifth chapter revisited Mbh on digital media and focuses on how social media platforms like Twitter, TV, and OTT platforms have facilitated the convergence of cultures and technologies. Stories, myths, and narratives from various traditions and historical periods are being retold and shared on social media, reaching global audiences with diverse perspectives. These narratives on social media capture the ‘nowness’ in their way of delivering stories. Through this storytelling approach, the narrative connects with a wider global audience, addressing modern issues while drawing from ancient traditions. This convergence of old and new creates a powerful and resonant storytelling experience that transcends cultural boundaries and

encourages a shared understanding of the human experience. Thus, Constant engagement with the epic through modern retellings across genres and popular media has helped to ‘traditionaize’ the contemporary issues and the modern society while modernizing the ancient traditionalized epic.

Appreciating the *Mahabharat* is meaningful when it helps individuals understand themselves and others in today's complex world. If we unquestioningly praise and celebrate the grandeur of the text, it makes us passive, almost like a religious activity. On the other hand, if we treat it like an artifact in a museum, fixing its status in society, it becomes a cognitive exercise. Instead, when we creatively engage with and reassess the epic narrative, this aesthetic act of reading helps us better understand both ourselves and others.

It's important to realize that engaging in a dialogue with others is not a one-sided experience. The 'other' doesn't just adapt to us; we, in turn, are also affected by the encounter. In this mutual exchange, our relationship with others can profoundly shape who we are. This idea aligns with Judith Butler's concept in "Giving an Account of Oneself" (2005), where she argues that our understanding of ourselves is influenced by our interactions with others. Applying this to retellings, readers don't just absorb a story—they grow and develop ethically, becoming more self-reflective. The ethical aspect encourages readers to build a responsible and accountable self-based on their relationship with the narrative and others. In conversation or dialogue, one responds to a previous utterance by another. The very act of responding to the call or question or demand is itself an ethical act as speaking to the other constitutes the core of morality in human life as it requires the sacrifice of ego (249) and confirms the

presence of others in order to fructify the self. It is through sincere conversation (sam+vada) that new meanings emerge; the ethical self gets developed.

In essence, encountering retellings of the Mahabharata has the power to make readers more accountable, responsible, and ethical. It prompts them to reflect on important issues such as suffering, human rights, agency, terrorism, justice, care, and forgiveness—issues that are universally relevant, especially in the face of the unprecedented crises our world is currently experiencing, such as war and ecological challenges. This engagement with retellings can spark meaningful dialogues and contribute to developing a more ethical and responsible society.

REFERENCES

Primary Readings

Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. *The Book of Night*. Seagull Books, 2008

Bhyrappa, S. L. *Parva: A Tale of War, Peace, Love, Death, God, and Man*. Translated by K. K. Raghavendra Rao, Sahitya Akademi,1994.

Dharmkshetra. Produced by Vaibhav Modi, directed by Sachin Kamalkar Khot. Television Series. 2014-15.

Ganguly, KisariMohan, Translator. *The Mahabharatha of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, 12 vols. Munshiram Manoharlal, 2007.

Patil, Amruta. *Sauptik: Blood Flowers*. HarperCollins Publishers India a joint venture by The India Today Group, 2016.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *The Pregnant King*. Penguin, 2008.

Sreedharan, Chindu. *Epic Retold*. Harper Collins, 2014.

Secondary Readings

Aarseth, E. *Cybertext: Perspectives on ergodic literature,* Johns Hopkins University Press. 1997.

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. Lakshmi Publications, 2001.

Abrams, Meyer Howard. *A glossary of literary terms*. Cengage, 2018

Altekar, A.S. *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization: from prehistoric times to the present day*, Motilal Banarsidass. 1959.

Amruta Patil, 'Umbilical: Questioning the Lord", March 8, 2009, http://amrutapatil.blogs pot.co.uk/2009/03/format-is-defi nitely-q.html. Accessed 2 Jan 2023).

Bakhtin, M. M. *Speech Genres and Other Late Essays*. translated by Vern W. McGee, University of Texas Press, 1986.

Bakhtin, Mikhael. "Forms of Time and the Chronotype in the Novel" in The Dialogic Imagination, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Austin, 1981

Bakhtin, Mikhael. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics.* Edited and translated by Caryl Emerson, University of Minnesota Press, 1984.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. "Epic and Novel: Toward a Methodology for the Study of the Novel." *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Edited by Michael Holquist, translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, Texas University Press, 1982, pp. 3-40.

Bakhtin, Mikhail. *Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays.* Translated by Caryl Emerson and edited by Michael Holquist, University of Texas Press, 1982.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi and E. V. Ramakrishnan, editors. *Bakhtinian Explorations of Indian Culture: Pluralism, Dogma and Dialogue Through History*. Springer publication, 2018.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi. "On Movements of Language-within self, of self, about self, and between selves: Commentary on language and self." Theory & Psychology, vol 24, no. 4, 2014, pp. 561-575.

Bandlamudi, Lakshmi. *Dialogics of Self, the Mahabharata and Culture: The History of Understanding and Understanding of History*. Anthem Press, 2011.

Bandlamudi, Laxmi. Interview, By Y Gradskova and P Chakrabarty, *Baltic Worlds,* Special Section 1-2, May 2017, p. 50.

Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji. “A Critique of Non –violence.” *Three Essays on the Mahabharata: Exercises in Literary Hermeneutics,* Orient Black Swan, 2016, pp. 267-307.

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” *Image Music Text.* Translated by Stephen Heath, Fontana Press, 1977, 142-148.

Barthes, Roland. “The Death of the Author.” Image, Music, Text, translated by Stephen Heath, Hill and Wang, 1977.

Belsey, Catherine. *Critical Practice*. Routledge, 2002.

Bhaduri, Nrisinga Prasad. *Mahabharater Pratinayak* , Ananda Publishers, 2009.

Bhartrhari. *The Vakyapadiya of Bhartrhari: II*, Translated by K.A.Subramania Iyer, Motilal Banarasidas, 1977.

Bhattacharya, Pradip. “Epic women: east and west – some observations,” *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* (4th series) vol. 37, no 3, 1995.

Bhattacharya, Pradip. “Panchakanya: Women of Substance.” *Journal of South Asian Literature,* Vol 35, no 1 /2, 2000, pp. 13-56.

Bhattacharya, S.C., et al., editors. *Exploring Agency in the Mahabharata: Ethical and Political Dimensions of Dharma*. Routledge India, 2018.

Bhyrappa, S. L. “Mahabharata: my attempt at a recreation.” *The Mahabharata Revisited*, Sahitya Akademi. 1990.

Biardeau, Madeleine (comm.) and Péterfalvi, Jean-Michel (tr.) Le Mahabharata: livres I, Flammarionà, V, vol. 1 of 2, 1969 .

Black, B., & Brodbeck, S. Editors. *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata* (1st ed.). Routledge. 2007.

Black, Brian. “Arguments of a Queen: Draupadi’s Views on Kinship.” *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*. Edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, Routledge, 2007, pp. 79-96.

Black, Brian. “Eavesdropping on the Epic: Female Listeners in the Mahabharata.” *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*. Edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, Routledge, 2007, pp. 53-78.

Black, Brian. *In Dialogue with the Mahabharata*. Routledge, 2021.

Booth, Wayne, *Introduction to Mikhail Bakhtin, Prob- lems of Dostoevsky's Poetics,* translated by Caryl Emerson, Min- neapolis, 1984.

Bose, Buddhadeva. The Book of Yudhistir: A Study of the Mahabharata of Vyas. Translated by Sujit Mukherjee, Sangam Books, 1986.

Brodbeck, Simon and Brian Black. “Intoduction.” Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata, ed., Routledge, 2007.

Brodbeck, Simon and Brian Black. “Introduction”, *Journal of Vaishnava Studies* Vol.14, no. 2, 2006, pp.1–8.

Buber, Martin. “I-Thou”. Translated by Walter Kaufman. Simon & Schuster, 1970.

Buber, Martin. *I-Thou*. Translated by Walter Kaufman, Simon & Schuster, 1970.

Butler, Judith. *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of Sex,* New York, 1993.

Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitutions in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” Theatre Journal. Vol. 40, no 51. 1988.

Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble: Feminism and Subversion of Identity.* Routledge, 1990.

Butler, Judith. *Giving an Account of Oneself.* Fordham University Press, 2005.

Carve, Iravati *Yuganta*. Orient Blackswan Pvt Ltd. 2013.

Chakrabarti, Arindam, and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, editors. *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*. Routledge, 2014.

Chakravarti, Sitansu. *Ethics in the Mahabharata: A Philosophical Inquiry for Today.* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 2006.

Chakravarty. Arindam. "Prasanga: Pratishodh." *Anustup*, vol 43. No 1, 2008, pp. 15-41.

Chandrasekhar, B.S. "Mahabharata in the Modern Idiom". *Indian literature*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1983, pp. 92-95.

Chandrasekhar, B.S. "Mahabharata in the Modern Idiom". *Indian Literature*, vol. 26, no. 3, 1983, pp. 92-95.

Chatterji, R. *Graphic Narratives and the Mythological Imagination in India*. Routledge India, 2019.

Claassens, L. Juliana M. "Biblical theology as dialogue: Continuing the conversation on Mikhail Bakhtin and Biblical theology." *Journal of Biblical Literature* . 2003. Vol 122 no. 1, pp. 127-144.

Connell, R. *Masculinities.* Sydney: Polity Press. 1995.

Craig, C. Brantley. *Renarration and Repair: Tradition and Fracture in Eliot, Updike, Diamant, and L'Engle.* University of Virginia, 2007.

Crown, Sarah. Twitter is a clunky way of delivering fiction. 2012. Books Blog. May 25. Available: https://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2012/may/25/twitter-feed-clunky-delivery

Custodi, Andrea. "'Show You Are a Man!' Transsexuality and Gender Bending in the Characters of Arjuna/Brhannada and Amba/Sikhandin." *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata.* Edited by Simon Brodbeck and Brian Black, Routledge, 2007, pp. 208-229.

Dalmiya, Vrinda. *Caring to Know, Comparative Care Ethics, Feminist Epistemology, and the Mahabharata.* Oxford University Press, 2016.

Dasgupta, Madhusraba (2000) "Usable women: the tales of Amba and Madhavı."*Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India*, Oxford University Press, 2000.

De Beauvoir, Simone. "The Second Sex," *Classic and Contemporary Readings in Sociology*. Routledge, 2014, pp.118-123.

deSouza, Peter Ronald. "Foreword" to *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*. Edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Routledge, 2014, pp. vii-xiv.

Dhand, Arti, *Woman as Fire, Woman as Sage: sexual ideology in the Mahabharata*, State University of New York Press. 2008.

Doniger, Wendy & Brian K. Smith, translators, *The Laws of Manu,* Penguin. 1991.

Doniger, Wendy. *Other Peoples' Myths*. Macmillan, 1988.

Emerson, Caryl, *Preface to problems of Dostoevesky's Poetic, by Mikhail Bakhtin*. Univ of Minnesota Press, 1984, xxxvi.

Fish, Stanley. 1970. "Literature in the Reader: Affective Stylistics." *New Literary History* . vol 2,1980, pp. 126–62

Fiske, J. *Television Culture.* Methuen, 1987.

Fitzgereld, James L. “The Great Epic of India as Religious Rhetoric: A Fresh Look at the ‘Mahabharata’.” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, vol. 51, no. 4, 1983, pp. 611-30.

Foucault, Michael. History of Sexuality, vol 1, Translated by Robert Hurley, Pantheon, 1978.

Friedman, Maurice “Martin Buber and Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogue o f Voices and the Word That Is Spoken,” *Religion & Literature*. Vol. 33, no. 3 (Autumn 2001), pp. 25-36.

Garg, Pooja and Akshay Kumar. “Reclaiming the Novelistic Past: A critical Study of Three MedievaL Indian Narratives.” Indian Literaature, vol 57, no 5, 2013, pp. 170-196.

Genette, Gerard. *Palimpsests: Literature in the Second Degree*, translated by. Channa Newman and Claude Doubinsky. University of Nebraska Press, 1997

Glover, David and Cora Kaplan. “ Introduction,” *Genders*, Routledge, 2000, pp. ix-xxviii.

Goldman, Robert. "Transsexualism, Gender and Anxiety in Traditional India" *Journal of American Oriental Societ*y, July-Sept, 1993.

Gravett, Emily Olmstead. “Literary Phenomenon on Narrative Biblical Retellings.” University of Virginia, 2013, Doctoral Dissertation.

Green, Barbara, *How Are the Mighty Fallen? A Dialogical Study of King Saul in 1 Samuel*. Sheffield Academic Press, 2003.

Halasek, Kay “Feminism and Bakhtin: Dialogic Reading in the Academy.” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly* , Vol. 22, No. 1, Winter, 1992. pp. 63-73

Halberstam, Judith. *Female Masculinity*. Duke University Press,1998.

Hegarty, James. *Religion, Narrative and Public Imagination in South Asia: Past and*

Hermans, H.J.M. and H.J.G. Kempen. *The Dialogical Self: Meaning as Movement*, Academic Press, 1993.

Hiltebeitel, Alf. *Rethinking the Mahabharata: a reader's guide to the education of the dharma king,* University of Chicago Press, 2001a**.**

Hiltebeitel, Alf. "Introducing the Mahābhārata." *Religious Studies Review,* vol 41, no 4, 2015, pp. 153-174.

Hohne, karen and Helen Wussow (Editors). *A Dialogue of Voices: Feminist Literary Theory Bakhtin,* University of Minnesota Press, 1994

Holquist, Michael. *Dialogism: Bakhtin and His World*, 2nd ed. Routledge, 2002), 16.

Iser, Wolfgang, "The Reading Process: A Phenomenological Approach." *New Literary History,* vol 3, no 2, pp. 279-299.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett.* The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974.

Iser, Wolfgang. *The Implied Reader: Patterns of Communication in Prose Fiction from Bunyan to Beckett*e. The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1974

Jamison, Stephanie W. *Sacrificed Wife / Sacrificer's Wife: women, ritual, and hospitality in ancient India,* Oxford University Press 1996.

Jerkins, Henry. *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York UP, 2006.

Jha Varsha & Mini Chandran. “Reading a retelling: *Mahabharata* in the graphic novel form”, *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comic*s, vol. 9, no. 4, 2018, pp. 373-390.

Kalugampitiya, Nandaka M. *Authorship, History, and Race in Three Contemporary Retellings of the Mahabharata: The Palace of Illusions, The Great Indian Novel, and The Mahabharata (Television Mini Series)*. Diss. Ohio University, 2016.

Kepnes, Steven. ‘The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology’ Indiana University Press, 1992

Kepnes, Steven. *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Kepnes, Steven. *The Text as Thou: Martin Buber's Dialogical Hermeneutics and Narrative Theology*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Kristeva, Julia. “The Bounded Text*.” Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* edited by Leon S. Roudiez, translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez, Columbia University Press,1980, pp 36-63.

Kristeva, Julia. “Word, Dialogue, and Novel.” *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art,* edited by Leon S. Roudiez, translated by Thomas Gora, Alice Jardine, and Leon S. Roudiez. Columbia University Press, 1980.

Lath, Mukund. “The Concept of *Ānuśamsya* in the Mahābhārata.” *The Mahābhārata Revisited*. Edited by R.N. Dandekar, Sahitya Akademi, 1990, pp. 113-119.

Latitude, project "Future of Storytelling" 2012(http://www.futureofstorytellingproject.com/

Lipari 2014. “On Interlistening and The Idea of Dialogue,” *Theory and Psychology*, Vol. 24, 2014, pp. 504-523.

Lipari, L. “On Interlistening and the Idea of Dialogue.” Theory & Psychology, vol. 24, pp. 504-523

Llyod, Genevieve. “The Divided Soul: Manliness and Effeminacy. *The Man of Reason: Male and Female in Western Philosophy*, London, Routledge, 1993.

Lodge, David. *After Bakhtin: Essays on Fiction and Criticism*.1990.

Lunenfield, p. “Unfinished Business,” *The Digital Dialectic*, edited by P. Lunenfield, MIT Press, 2000. pp. 6-23,

Malinar, Angelika. “Arguments of a Queen: Draupadı’s views on kingship.” Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata

Margolin, U. "Of What Is Past, Is Passing, or to Come: Temporality, Aspec-tuality, Modality and the Nature of Literary Narrative*,” Narratologies: New Perspectives on Narrative Analysis*. Edited by D. Herman Ohio State University Press, 1999, pp. 142–166.

Marrioti, Mckim. "The Feast of Love." *Myths. Rites and Attitudes*, edited by Milton Singer, The University of Chicago Press, 1966

McCloud, Scott. “Understanding Comics.” The Invisible Art. Harper Perrennial, 1993.

McCracken, E. “Expanding Genette’s epitext/peritext model for transitional electronic literature: centrifugal and centripetal vectors on Kindles and iPads.” *Narrative*, vol. *21*, 2013. pp. 105–124.

Mehta, J.L. “Dvaipana, Poet of Being and Becoming,” (1990) *The Mahabharata Revisited*, Sahitya Akademi. 1990.

Millet, Kate. *Sexual Politics*, London: Abacus, 1972

Miscall, Peter D. “Isaiah: New Heavens, New Earth, New Book.” Reading between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible, edited by Fewell, Danna Nolan, John Knox Press, 1992.

Monier-Williams M. *Sanskrit English Dictionary.* Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers pvt. Ltd., 1899

Morson, Gary Saul “Parody, History, and Metaparody,” *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions and Challenges*. Edited by Gary Saul Morson and Caryl Emerson. Northwestern University Press, 1989.

Morson, Gary Saul and Caryl Emerson (eds.). *Rethinking Bakhtin: Extensions andChallenges*. Evanston, IL, 1989

Mukherjee, Gangeya, “Himsa-Ahimsa in the Mahabharat,” . *Mahabharata Now: Narration, Aesthetics, Ethics*, edited by Arindam Chakrabarti and Sibaji Bandyopadhyay, Routledge, 2014.

Newsom, Carol A. “Bakhtin, the Bible, and Dialogic Truth”. *The Journal of Religion* , Apr., 1996, Vol. 76, No. 2, pp. 290-306. Web. 12 july 2021.

Paniker, K. Ayyappa. “The Great Indian Novel: Reminiscential and Subversive.”*The Postmoderm Indian English Novel: Interrogating the 1980*s. Edited by Viney Kirpal, Allied, 1996, pp 67-70.

Pathak, Shubha.“‘Epic’ as an Amnesiac Metaphor: Finding the Word to Compare Ancient Greek and Sanskrit Poems.” *Figuring Religions: Comparing Ideas,*

Images, and Activities, edited by Shubha Pathak.State University of New York Press,2013, PP. 35-62

Patil, Amruta. Adi Parva: Churning of the Ocean. Harper Collins, 2012

Patnaik, T. *SABDA: A Study of Bhartrhari's Philosophy of Language*. D.K. Printworld (P) Ltd, 2007.

Pattanaik, Devdutt. *Shikhandi and Other Tales They Don't Tell You*, Penguin India, 2014.

Patterson, Lee. 1985. "The Logic of Textual Criticism and the Way of Genius." *Textual criticism and Literary Criticism*, edited by Jerome McGann, The University of Chicago Press, 1985

Patton, Laurie L. "How do you conduct yourself? Gender and the construction of a dialogical self in the Mahabharata." *Gender and Narrative in the Mahabharata*, Routledge, 2007, pp. 97-109.

Place in the Sanskrit Mahabhrata. Routledge, 2012

Rao, K. Raghavendra. "Myth as Human Experience: Bhyrappa's Kannada Novel, 'Parva.'" Indian Literature, vil31, no. 1(123), 1988, pp. 113-122.

Reich, Tamar. *A Battleground of a Text: Inner Textual Interpretation in the Sanskrit Mahabharata*. University of Chicago. 1998.

Renfrew, Alaister. *Mikhail Bakhtin, Routledge Critical Thinkers Series*, Routledge, 2014.

Ricoeur, P. *Time and Narrative* (Vol. 2), translated by K. Blamey and D. Pellauer, Chicago University Press, 1985.

Robinson, A. "Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polphony and Heteroglosiia Theory." Ceasefire Magazine, 29 July. 2011.

Roy, Abhay Kumar. “The Mahabharata in an Age of Twitter: Exploring Chindu Sreedharan’s Mythopoeic Imagination in Epic Retold.” Quest Journals: Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Science, Vol. 6, no. 8, 2018, pp. 31-34

Rubin, Gayle (1996) “The traffic in women: notes on the “political economy” of sex’”, *Feminism and History*, edited by Joan Wallach Scott, Oxford University Press, 1996.

Sahgal, Smita. “Gendered Inquiry into Niyoga: Apprising the Institution from the Perspective of Female Actors.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 72, 2011 pp. 179-192

Sahgal, Smita. “Masculinity in Early India: Constructing an Embryonic Frame.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 70 (2009-2010), pp. 151-163.

Shah, Shalini (1995) “The Making of Womanhood: gender relations in the Mahabharata,” Manohar, 1995.

Sharma, Shivani & Arnapurna Rath “ In the Semiosis of Characters and Colors: Locating Metaphors and Their Meanings in Amruta Patil’s Graphic Novels *Adi Parva* and *Sauptik*,” *South Asian Review*, 2021. DOI: 10.1080/02759527.2021.1878798

Shepherd, David, “Bakhtin and the Reader.” *Bakhtin and Cultural Theory*, Manchester University Press, 2024

Shulman, David Dean."Towards a Historical Poetics of the Sanskrit Epics." *International Folklore Review,* 1991, pp. 9 -17.

Spivak, Gayatri Chakrabarty. "Terror: a Speech After 9-11.” 2004, pp. 91-94

Sreedharan, Chindu. “Social media narrative: Issues in contemporary practice” hosted by The Rutgers Camden Digital Studies Center and Judy Malloy and the Rutgers Camden DSC Class, *Social Media Narrative: Lineage and Contemporary Practice* Facebook, November 16–21, 2016.

Stahlberg. LC, "Sustaining Fictions: Intertextuality, Midrash, Translation and the Literary Afterlife of the Bible,” T&T Clark, 2008, PP. 211

Sukthankar, Vishnu Sitaram. "Prolegomena." *Mahabharata. Vol. I. Adi Parvan*. Edited by Sukthankar V. S., et al., Bhandarkar Oriental Institute, 1933.

Sukthankar, Vishnu Sitaram. *On the Meaning of the Mahabharata*. Motilal Banarsidass, 2016.

Thapar, Romila. *Śakuntalā: Texts, Readings, Histories*. Kali for Women, 1999.

Thomas, Bronwen, “140 Characters in search of a story: Twitterfiction as an emerging narrative form.” Edited by A. Bell, A. Ensslin, and H. Kristian Rustad *Analyzing digital fiction*, Routledge, 2014. pp. 94–108.

Thomas, Bronwen. “Tales from the Timeline: Experiments with narrative on Twitter”. *Comparative Critical Studies*, vol.13, no.3, 2017, pp. 353–369. doi: 10.3366/ccs.2016.0210

Thomas, Bronwen. *Narrative*: *The basics*, Routledge, 2016

Van Buitenan, J. A. B., translator. *The Mahabharata*. University of Chicago Press, 1978 (1973).

van Buitenen, J.A.B. editor and translator, *The Book of Forest*, University of Chicago Press. 1977.

van Buitenen, J.A.B. editor and translator, *The Maha ̄bha ̄rata, vol. 3, Book 4, The Book of Virata; Book 5, The Book of the Effort*, Chicago, IL, and London: University of Chicago Press. 1978.

Vanita, Ruth, "The self is not gendered: Sulabha's debate with King Janaka", *National Women's Studies Association Journal*, vol.15, no.2, 2003, pp. 76–93.

Weeks. Jeffrey. *Sexuality*, Routledge, 1986.

Weiss, Julian Todd. The Gender Caste System: Identity Privacy, and Heteronormativity, Law &Sexuality. Vol, 10, no. 123, 2001, pp.1-64

White, Allon, "Bakhtln. sociolinguistics and deconstruction," *The Theory of Reading*, Edited by Frank Gloversmith. Brighton, and Totowa. N.J., 1984, pp. 128, 129

Willams, R. Television: Technology and Cultural Form". Fontana. 1974

Williams, R. L. "New approaches to the novel: From Terra Nostra to twitter literature". *Revista Co*-herencia1, vol. 2, no. 22, 2015, pp. 13–23.

Williams, R. *Television: Technology and Cultural Form*. Fontana, 1974.

Zwilling, Leonard and Sweet, Michael J. "The evolution of third-sex constructs in ancient India: a study in ambiguity." Invented Identities: the interplay of gender, religion and politics in India, edited by Invented Identities: the interplay of gender, religion and politics in India Oxford University Press. 2000.

LIST OF PUBLICATIONS

3. **(2023) "Exploring the Ethics of Care with reference to *Ānṛśaṃsya* and *Anukrosa* from the Mahabharata". *Literary Voice: A Peer-Reviewed Journal of English Studies*. Vol. 1, March 2023. 202-208. ISSN: 2277-4521. (ESCI) Web of Science.**

4. **(2022) "*Ahimsa* and *Anrśamsya* Dharma from the *Mahabharata* for a Sustainable Universe". *Journal of Dharma.* Vol. 47. No. 2, 203-216. ISSN: 0253-7222. Scopus. (AHCI) Web of Science. http://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/issue/view/289**

Journal of Dharma 47, 2 (April-June 2022), 203-216

AHIMSA AND *ĀNṚŚAṂSYA* DHARMA FROM THE *MAHABHARATA* FOR A SUSTAINABLE UNIVERSE

Bithika Gorai and Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi•

Abstract: The article explores and elucidates two *parama* (greatest) dharmas from the *Mahabharata*, *Ānṛśaṃsya* (absence of cruelty, vileness, and treachery) and *Ahimsa* (non-violence), as a means to promote the goal for a sustainable way of living in the world which faces the challenges of a narrow anthropocentric worldview. Having investigated the intricacies involved in violence, non-violence, and just violence with illustrations from the *Mahabharata*, the paper delves into the principle of *anṛśaṃsya* and its practical applicability in real life. The ethical practice of *Ānṛśaṃsya* in action, if transmitted from individual to the community, can bring positive changes in the functioning of the world, ensuring the welfare and sustainable prosperity for all.

Keywords: Anthropocentric, Common Welfare, Interspecies Relationship, *Parama Dharma*, Sustainable Planet.

1. Introduction

Contemporary culture is marked by its anthropocentric approach, which emphasises upon creating a technology-oriented, human-centric universe, catering to selfish human greed and ambition. The pace at which science and technology have advanced after the industrial revolution in the west, has made human life easier and more comfortable. While such technological and scientific revolution should have made human civilisation feel more secure and less volatile, in reality, the value of life has become more insignificant. We are constantly living under the intimidating

•**Bithika Gorai** is Assistant Professor, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi. Email: bgorai@ip.du.ac.in
Dr Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi is Associate Professor, Delhi Technological University. Email: rajivdwivedi@dtu.ac.in

shadow of inter-state and intra-state terrorism, communal violence, and selective and senseless killings in the name of blind nationalism, to highlight a few.

The ongoing Russia-Ukraine conflict is the most current example of the volatile and precarious time, we live in. The pictures of violence, destruction, and thousands of soldiers, getting killed every day are witnessed by the entire world along with the Russian threat of using nuclear weapons, which can presumably destroy human civilisation to a large extent. Moreover, environmental degradation, global warming, extinction of species, chemical pollution, and aggressive exploitation of nature and natural elements for pursuing narrow political or economic interests have caused serious concern for the survival of humankind. The crisis in the ecology and human civilisation is due to the practice of a blind anthropocentric philosophy which considers the lives of other beings and organisms in nature as subservient and to be exploited for human comfort. Such an anthropocentric approach toward the universe has always proved detrimental to the goals of sustainability and to making the planet a common home (*Oikos*) for all the varieties of innumerable species that inhabit the earth (White 1203-1207).

The crisis of the universe is further escalated due to a narrow understanding of progress in the name of scientific and technological development. Science and technology-oriented progress is thought to be the *sine qua non* for the future of human beings. "Our daily habits of action," White writes, "are dominated by an implicit faith in perpetual progress" (1205). However, a true sense of development must be holistic and should be deeply social and philosophical in nature. It needs to be informed by an ecological norm which is based on the principle of harmonious coexistence between man and nature. If progress entails the improvement of the material condition of human beings, it should equally ensure justice, equality, fraternity, and harmony. Like a double-edged sword, development destroys the planet while providing material progress. Therefore, the question of development without exploitation must be approached cautiously. We require a new approach to our thoughts and action, a revisit to

Exploring the Ethics of Care with reference to *Ānṛśamsya and Anukrosa* from the *Mahabharata*

Bithika Gorai*
Dr. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi**

Abstract

The article aims to investigate a sustainable way of living in the world with special emphasis on the ethics of care and concern for the human and non-human entities inhabiting the world. The question of living with others is different from living by exploiting others; if the former implies a world of coexistence, the latter suggests a relationship of aggression and subjugation over others in an anthropocentric world. At a time, when the world discourse is concentrating upon ensuring ecological balance, sustainability and possible coexistence between planet and people, what could be possibly the best place but to look back at the classical texts like Mahabharata *which preaches dharma and morality? The article will concentrate upon two comparatively less discussed concepts* Ānṛśamsya *and* Anukrosa, *from the epic and their relation with ethics of care as a possible way of attaining sustainability in life, while problematizing the impractability of following ahimsa as the 'greatest dharma' in worldly life. Talking simply about interdependence, coexistence and reverence for others is not going to solve the problem of an anthropocentric universe. We need to practice empathy for others in our everyday existence. The recognition of others is possible only through the recognition of ignorance in self and potentialities in others while being responsible for them.*
***Keywords**: Care ethics,* Ānṛśamsya, *Anukrosa, Mahabharata, sustainability*

Introduction

The sudden outbreak of the Covid 19 and its worldwide catastrophic loss of millions of people, brought human activities to a standstill across the globe. The horrifying effect of Covid 19 pandemic has gone beyond the boundaries of developed and developing nations, forcing us to introspect over the kind of world we desire to live in, a technologically advanced world of material prosperity, always shrouded by the fear and insecurity of nuclear threat, terrorism, biological warfare or a sustainable planet where progress of people is in tune with the planet and the prosperity of few members of one species will not be achieved by smothering the others. The pandemic has shown us the glaring inequalities in our societies; the disparity at the social and economic level has adversely affected the lives of poor and under-privileged people. It is a sad truth that more vulnerable beings tend to get more exploited in our society. The virus, however, spared neither the richest nor the poorest, making us conscious of the fragility and vulnerability of human existence. At the same time, the world has witnessed instances of caring, mutual support and cooperation for others, giving glimpses of a caring and livable world. It is high time that we engage more and more on the importance of ethical discourse to address the issues of ruthless aggression and senseless exploitation by human beings for pursuing their selfish motives. The anthropocentric/human-centric interest has made us oblivious of human values of care, respect and reverence for other lives. It is in this alarming situation, ethics of care may offer the last refuge to save mankind as well as the

planet from imminent catastrophic events caused by nature or human beings.

The crisis of ecosystem which is the result of historical exploitation of nature cannot be resolved by new science or more developed technologies; we can neither go back to traditional society ruled by nature's laws nor we can live life without the progress, prosperity and convenience, modern technology has offered. What we need is a sustainable way of living on the planet causing minimum violence to others, or at least, we have the sensibility to feel empathy for other beings. We could possibly look back at classical texts which preach reverence and morality; instead of a simple devotional approach towards other beings and things, we may try to inculcate some of the ethical and caring philosophies which may be relevant today for a sustainable world. It is believed that all human beings are by nature ethical beings (*Homo Ethicus*) and it is the awareness and consciousness of ethical values and well being which humanize the non-human and make one responsible and caring for others. I would like to explore the concepts of Ānṛśamsya and *Anukrosa* from the *Mahabharata* as *parama dharmas* and their relation with ethics of care as a possible way of to live in the world and coexisting with other beings in life.

Mahabharata has successfully and very effectively emphasized upon interdependent relation between human and nature, reinforcing an innate ecological awareness of human society at the moral and spiritual level. It depicts that all kinds of lives on this earth form a part of this universe. In *Mahabharata*, the entire creation is considered as a divine body. Humans have obligation to protect nature for their own survival and enrichment whereas brutality and manipulation against nature will cause destruction of the earth. The concept of *Dharma*, propagated in the *Mahabharata* has multiple implications; what it means is to live in tune with nature (Fitzgerald 249-263). Among its various interpretations, it refers to moral obligation of an individual to do his duty unconditionally for the society and the universe. It is a collective of all such activities which help to sustain and strengthen the cosmic order and strengthen an individual. The opposite of *dharma* is *adharma* which is destructive to the universe. Man's egotistic living, senseless violence and cruel behavior towards others without any sense of consideration or empathy is adharma. Human aggression and selfish interest can never be just to nature or to the fellow beings. It is the responsibility and obligation of a human being to work on his/her self, practice self-restraint in order to curb the demonic aspects.

Understanding *Ānṛśamsya* and *Anukrosa* as a Bridge between *Ahimsa* and *Himsa*

The concepts of Ānṛśamsya and *Anukrosa* in the *Mbh* (abbreviation of *Mahabharata*) tradition of dharma are relatively less studied and they deserve a special attention in order to understand the negotiated *ahimsa or* non-violence, the Mbh tradition upholds. *Ahimsa* or non violence has always been celebrated as the *parama dharma* or the highest/greatest dharma which should guide our life; but interestingly if the concept of *ahimsa* has been celebrated four times in the epic, the Ānṛśamsya has been upheld as the highest dharma nine times (Hiltelbeitel 207) in the epic. Ānṛśamsya which literally means the state 'of not being Ānṛśamsya 'refers to the absence of vile, cruel and selfish nature of being in one's conduct with other beings. The concept of Ānṛśamsya is related to positive connotations

DELHI TECHNOLOGIAL UNIVERSITY
(Formerly Delhi College of Engineering)
Shahbad Daulatpur, Main Bawana Road, Delhi-110042

PLAGIARISM VERIFICATION

Title of the Thesis: Reading the *Mahabharat*: A Study of Select Contemporary Retellings Across Genres and Media

Total pages: 228 Pages Name of the Scholar: Bithika Gorai

Supervisor: Prof. Rajiv Ranjan Dwivedi

Department of Humanities, Delhi Technological University

This is to report that the above thesis was scanned for similarity detection. Process and outcome given below:

Software used: Turnitin Similarity Report

Similarity Index: 1% Overall Similarity

Total Word Count: 71858 words

Date: 11th September 2024

Candidate's Signature **Signature of Supervisor**

CURRICULUM VITAE

Ms. Bithika Gorai

Email: bgorai@ip.du.ac.in

Email: bithika_2k18phdhu503@dtu.ac.in

Orcid ID: 0000-0002-5662-6999

Google Scholar ID: fSJw00YAAAAJ

Educational Qualifications

Degree: Bachelor of Arts (Hons) English, University of Burdwan (2003-06)

Degree: Master of Arts, English, University of Burdwan (2006-08)

Degree: PhD, Pursuing

Awards and Distinctions

(i) Qualified NET (National Eligibility Test) for Lectureship organized by UGC (University Grants Commission), held in year 2009

(ii) Awarded Junior Research Fellowship by University Grants Commission in year 2009

(iii) Awarded Chaya Rani Medal by 'Bankura Zilla Saradamani Mahila Mahavidyapith' for scoring highest marks in the college in Higher Secondary Examination.

(iv) Awarded Merit Certificate by 'Lion's club of Bankura' on achieving a brilliant result in the Higher Secondary Examination, 2003.

Career Profile

(i) Working as Assistant Professor in Department of English of 'Indraprastha College for Women', University of Delhi

(ii) Qualified National Eligibility Test in the subject English, organized by UGC (University Grants Commission), held in the year 2009 with JRF

(iii) 14 years of teaching experience in the field of English literature and Literary Theories.

(iv) Presented papers in National/International conferences and Publications of Research Papers

(v) PhD: Registered & Ongoing

Areas of Interest / Specialization

Indian Classical literature, Postcolonialism, Cosmopolitanism, Ethics, Indian English Fiction, Crime Fiction

Research Articles

(i) Gorai. B (2023) Exploring the Ethics of Care with reference to Ānṛśaṃsya and Anukrosa from the Mahabharata. Literary Voice: A Peer-Reviewed Journal of English Studies. Vol. 1, March 2023. 202-208. ISSN: 2277- 4521. Web of Science (ESCI).

(ii) Gorai. B (2022) Ahimsa and Anrśamsya Dharma from the Mahabharata for a Sustainable Universe. Journal of Dharma. Vol. 47. No. 2, 203-216. ISSN: 0253-7222. Scopus. Web of Science (AHCI). http://dvkjournals.in/index.php/jd/issue/view/289

(iii) Gorai. B (2023) Resisting Tradition, Asserting Agency: A study with reference to AparnaSen's Directorial Film Goynar Baksho. International Journal of English Literature, Language & Skills. Vol.11. no 4, pp. 22-30, ISSN. 2278-0742

(iv) Gorai. B (2023) Resisting Tradition, Asserting Agency: A study with reference to AparnaSen's Directorial Film Goynar Baksho. International Journal of English Literature, Language & Skills. Vol.11. no 4, pp. 22-30, ISSN. 2278-0742

Book Chapter

(i) Gorai, B. (2022) Experimenting with Twitter Fiction: a Study with Reference to Epic Retold. Digitization of Culture Through Technology. Edited by Deepanjali Mishra and Sasmita Rani Samanta. Routledge, 2022. ISBN: 9781032315478

(ii) Gorai, B. (2021) Exploring the Novelistic Genre in India with Special Reference to Bangla Mahabharata narratives in the Medieval Period. In Conference Proceedings (International Interdisciplinary Conference on Narratives, Self and Identities: Traditions and Innovations) Eswar Publication, Tamilnadu, India. ISBN: 978-81-931101-8-8

(iii) Gorai, B. (2017) Can Politics Coexist with Ethics? A Brief Study from Postmodern Ethical Perspective. International Journal of English: Literature, Language & Skills, 6(2), 31-35. http://www.ijells.com/volume-6-issue-2-july-2017/. ISBN: 2278-0742

(iv) Gorai, B. (2017) Seeking the Ethical Self: A Postcolonial Perspective. In. G.C. Mishra & S. K. Jha (Eds.) Conference Proceedings (International Conference on Role of Arts, Culture, Humanities, Religion, Education, Ethics, Philosophy, Spirituality and Science for Holistic Societal Development by Krishi Sanskriti Publication. (pp. 137-140). ISBN: 978-93-85822-42-1

(v) Gorai, B. (2016) Going Beyond Postcolonial Identities: Towards Cosmopolitanism. The Commonwealth Review, 24(1), 73-84. ISBN: 0974-0473

Conference and Workshop

Paper Presentation in Conference

(i) Care Ethics and Sustainable Living: Some Insights from the Mahabharata (2024) is presented in the International Conference on Stories Matter: (Re)-thinking Narratives, Aesthetics, and Human Values, organized by the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, in collaboration with the Malaviya Centre for Ethics and Human Values, and will take place on December 6-7, 2024, in Varanasi. (Online)

(ii) Reimagining Ashwathama Today: A Study of the Tamil Film ‘Ashwatthama’ (2023)” is presented in the Interdisciplinary International Conference Mahabharata Epic Across Asia: Ancient Indian Knowledge System Transcending Spatio-Temporal Boundaries sponsored by ICSSR, hosted by EFLU, Hyderabad 29-31 May 2023

(iii) "Experimenting with Twitter Fiction: a Study with Reference to Epic Retold" is presented in International Conference on Digitalization hosted by KIIT University in collaboration with Rutledge, held on 23rd-24th November 2021 (Online 23-24 November 2021

(iv) "Exploring the Novelistic Genre in India with Special Reference to Bangla Mahabharata narratives in the Medieval Period" in International Interdisciplinary Conference on "Narratives, Self and Identities: Traditions and Innovations" held on 30th and 31st August 2021 organized by REVA University, Bangalore, ISPELL, and Liverpool John Moores University, Liverpool, England.

(v) Ecological Concerns in Mahabharata" In: Three-Day

(vi) International Virtual Conference on Indigenous Studies Organised by Cape Comorin Trust, India in collaboration with School of Arts and Social Sciences, Southern Cross University, Australia on 20-22 August 2020.

(vii) "Alternative Modernities in South Asian Literature: An Answer to Eurocentric Modernity" In: 6th JGU International Conference (online) on "Theory-Literature Interface", organized by the English Literary Society, O.P. Jindal Global University on July 24-26, 2020

(viii) Voice of Others: A Brief Study of Anita Desai's "In Custody"' In: National Conference on "(Re)defining Marginalities" organized by Zakir Husain College (Evening), University of Delhi, March 2019.

(ix) Im)possibility of Ethics in Postcolonial Novel: a Study of JM Coetzee's "Discourse"' In: International Conference on Postcolonial Literature organized by 'Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies', Jan 2016 25-27 January 2016

(x) "Going Beyond Postcolonial Identities: Towards Cosmopolitanism", In: International Conference on Postcolonial Literature organized by 'Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies', Jan 2015 28-30 January 2015

(xi) Is Postcolonial Fiction Gradually Giving Way to Cosmopolitan Fiction?", In: International Conference on Landmarks in Indian and World Literatures

organized by ‘Indian Society for Commonwealth Studies’, Nov 2015. 26-28 November 2015

(xii) The Redemption of King Lear’ at the Department of English, University of Burdwan, May 2008. 5 May 2008

Session Chair in Conference

(i) Chaired a session in the International Conference on Stories Matter: (Re)-thinking Narratives, Aesthetics, and Human Values, organized by the Department of English, Banaras Hindu University, on December 6-7, 2024 (Online).

(ii) Chaired a session at the International Conference on Revisiting History, Ethnicity and Myth in Literature organized by Amity University, Rajasthan, 19-20 October’23

(iii) Chaired a session at the 6th International JGU Conference (online)on”Theory-Literature Interface”, organized by the English Literary Society, O.P.indal Global University on Ju24-26, 2020

Participation in Workshop

(i) Online FDP on Cultural Heterogeneity in Language, Linguistics and Literature to be held from 1st July to 6th July. 1 to 6th July 2024

(ii) Participated in the course entitled, 18 Parvans of Mahabharata conducted jointly by Bhandarkar Oriental Research Institute and Nyansa. 24th January to 11th February 2022

(iii) FDP on Research Paper Writing and Publishing in Scopus and UGC Care Journal, organized by Bharati College, Feb 1, 2022 to Feb 8, 2022

(iv) Webinar on the topic ‘New media Studies’ organized by Amity School of Language January 19, 2022

(v) FDP on Academic Research Writing Teaching Learning Centre, Ramanujan College & SBSC, University of Delhi, Ministry of Education Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching, December 31, 2021 to January 6, 2022

(vi) Refresher Course on Indian folklore, Culture and Traditions CPDHE, University of Delhi 27 December 2021 to 08 January 2022

(vii) National webinar titled TRANSLATOR'S Task - Transition, Transmission, organized by the Department of Languages, Literature and Aesthetics, School of Liberal Studies (SLS)

(viii) A two-day workshop on Research in Literature: State and Directions organized by Department of Humanities, Delhi Technological University

(ix) Faculty Development Program on Basics of Online Teaching and Learning, IQAC, Indraprastha College for Women July 24, 2020- July 30, 2020

(x) Faculty Development Program on Exploring the Inter-linkages Between Literature, Politics and other Related Themes, Teaching Learning Centre, Ramanujan College & PGDAV College, University of Delhi, Ministry of Education Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya National Mission on Teachers and Teaching Jan 30, 2021- Feb 12, 2021

(xi) Inter-Disciplinary and Multi Lingual Two-Week Refresher Course/ Faculty Development Program, Teaching Learning Centre, Ramanujan College University of Delhi under the aegis of Ministry of Education, Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya National Mission on Teacher and Teaching March 11, 2021 – March 26, 2021